



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

Donald C. Swope

(F)

Aug 12 1883

COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

Other Books in the
"CLASSIC COMMENTARY LIBRARY"

COMMENTARY ON THE PROPHECIES OF ISAIAH

by J. A. Alexander

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

by Robert Candlish

THE EPISTLE OF ST. JAMES

by Joseph B. Mayor

THE EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL TO THE GALATIANS

by J. B. Lightfoot

ST. PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by J. B. Lightfoot

ST. PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS AND TO PHILEMON

by J. B. Lightfoot

COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

by Robert Candlish

COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

by John Eadie

COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

by F. L. Godet

ST PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by J. B. Lightfoot



Commentary

ON

Genesis

VOL. I— GENESIS 1-27:40

Robert S. Candlish, D.D.

*Author of
"The First Epistle of John"*



Classic Commentary Library

ZONDERVAN PUBLISHING HOUSE
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

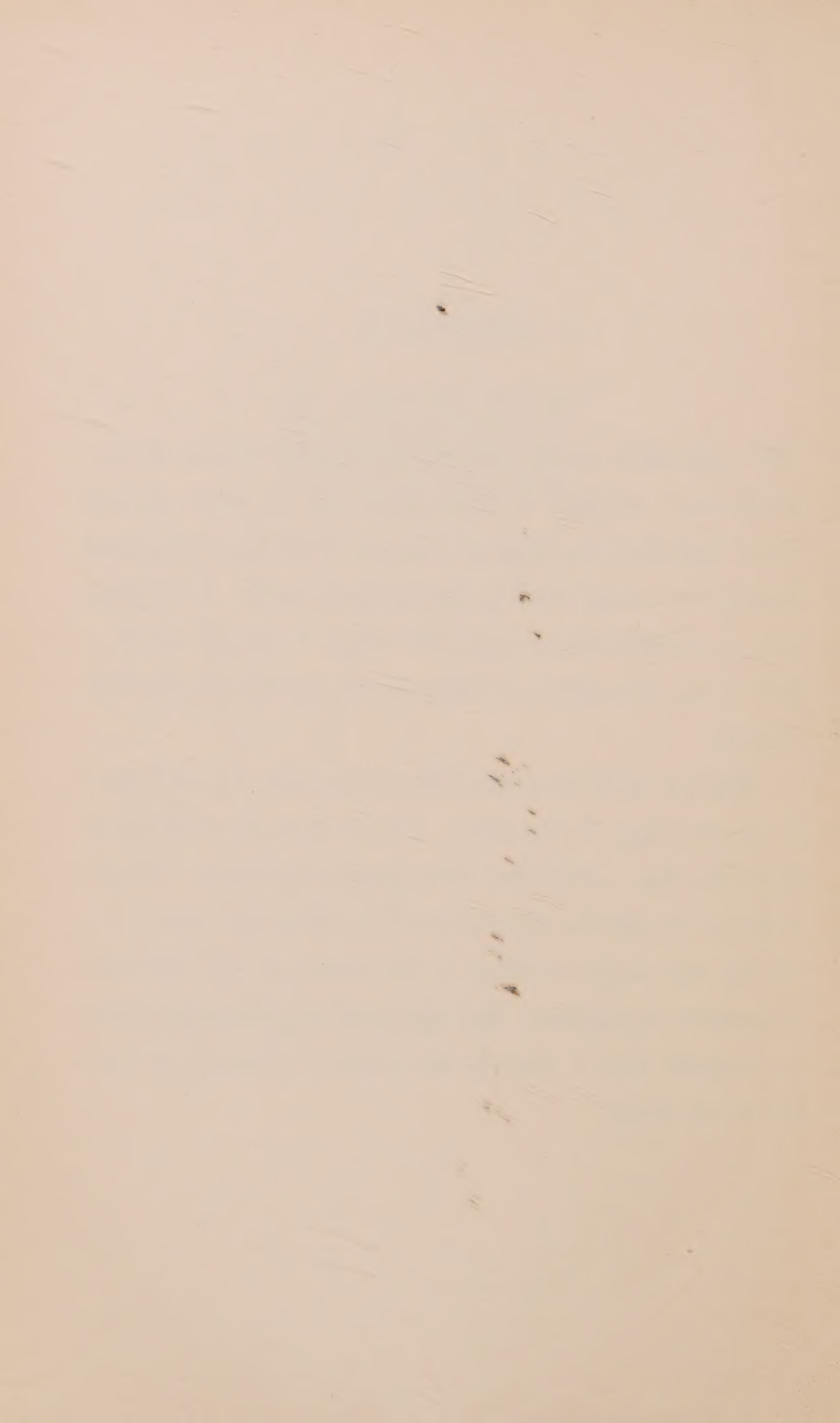
This complete and unabridged
reprint edition of Dr. Candlish's
work is reprinted from the edi-
tion of 1868 published by Adam
and Charles Black of Edinburg.

Printed in the United States of America

PREFACE.

THE Appendix at the end of the second volume of this publication contains a brief statement of some general views regarding the Book of Genesis, which have impressed themselves on my mind in the course of study. It contains also a supplementary paper, for which I am not sorry to find room, illustrative of that on circumcision in the first volume.

Having carefully revised the entire work, I have agreed to an alteration of the title. I wish it to be understood, however, that I still offer these papers merely as "Contributions towards the exposition of the Book of Genesis ;"—not by any means entitled to the character of a full and exhaustive exposition. The change of title is simply meant to indicate that I offer to the public a commentary upon the whole book.



CONTENTS OF VOLUME I.

	PAGE
I. CREATION VIEWED AS MATTER OF FAITH	1
II. THE CREATION OF THE WORLD AND MAN VIEWED ON ITS HEAVENLY SIDE	18
III. THE CREATION OF MAN VIEWED AS ON THE SIDE OF EARTH; AND HIS EARTHLY ORIGIN AND RELATIONS .	34
IV. DEVOTIONAL AND PROPHETIC* VIEW OF THE CREATION, BEING AN APPENDIX TO THE TWO PRECEDING PAPERS	46
V. THE FIRST TEMPTATION—ITS SUBTLETY AS IMPEACHING THE GOODNESS, JUSTICE, AND HOLINESS OF GOD .	60
VI. THE FRUIT OF THE FIRST SIN—THE REMEDIAL SENTENCE	71
VII. THE FIRST FORM OF THE NEW DISPENSATION—THE CON- TEST BEGUN BETWEEN GRACE AND NATURE	86
VIII. THE APOSTATE SEED—THE GODLY SEED—THE UNIVERSAL CORRUPTION	108
IX. THE END OF THE OLD WORLD BY WATER—THE COM- MENCEMENT OF THE NEW WORLD RESERVED UNTO FIRE	127
X. THE CONSTITUTION OF THE NEW WORLD, IN ITS THREE DEPARTMENTS OF NATURE, PROVIDENCE, AND GRACE—	
I. THE LAW OF NATURE	140

XI. THE CONSTITUTION OF THE NEW WORLD, IN ITS THREE DEPARTMENTS OF NATURE, PROVIDENCE, AND GRACE —II. THE SCHEME OF PROVIDENCE	151
XII. THE CONSTITUTION OF THE NEW WORLD, IN ITS THREE DEPARTMENTS OF NATURE, PROVIDENCE, AND GRACE —III. THE ELECTION OF GRACE	157
XIII. THE EARTH GIVEN TO THE CHILDREN OF MEN, AND OCCUPIED BY THEM	167
XIV. THE CALL OF ABRAM—HIS JUSTIFICATION—THE POWER OF HIS FAITH, AND ITS INFIRMITY	181
XV. THE INHERITANCE OF THE LAND PROMISED TO ABRAM	194
XVI. VICTORY OVER THE INVADERS OF THE LAND—INTERVIEW WITH MELCHIZEDEK	209
XVII. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH—INSIGHT INTO THINGS TO COME	230
XVIII. THE TRIAL OF FAITH—ITS INFIRMITY	252
XIX. THE REVIVAL OF FAITH—THE REPETITION OF THE CALL	263
XX. THE RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT	270
XXI. THE SEAL OF THE COVENANT—THE SACRAMENT OF CIRCUMCISION (See Appendix II. at the end of Volume second.)	279
XXII. ABRAHAM THE FRIEND OF GOD	292
XXIII. THE GODLY SAVED, YET SO AS BY FIRE; THE WICKED UTTERLY DESTROYED	313
XXIV. THE IMPRESSION OF THE SCENE WHEN ALL IS OVER	330
XXV. CARNAL POLICY DEFEATED—EVIL OVERRULED FOR GOOD	336
XXVI. THE SEPARATION OF THE SEED BORN AFTER THE FLESH FROM THE SEED THAT IS BY PROMISE	346

XXVII. ALLEGORY OF ISHMAEL AND ISAAC—THE TWO COVE- NANTS	356
XXVIII. THE TRIAL, TRIUMPH, AND REWARD OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH	364
XXIX. TIDINGS FROM HOME—THEIR CONNECTION WITH SARAH'S DEATH AND ISAAC'S MARRIAGE	383
XXX. THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF A PRINCESS	388
XXXI. A MARRIAGE CONTRACTED IN THE LORD	401
XXXII. THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM	416
XXXIII. THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF ABRAHAM	421
XXXIV. THE FAMILY OF ISAAC—THE ORACLE RESPECTING JACOB AND ESAU	435
XXXV. PARENTAL FAVOURITISM AND FRATERNAL FEUD	441
XXXVI. THE CHOSEN FAMILY UNDER ISAAC—HIS PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN HIS PILGRIMAGE	451
XXXVII. THE TRANSMISSION OF THE BIRTHRIGHT-BLESSING	456



I.

CREATION VIEWED AS MATTER OF FAITH.

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God ; so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.—HEBREWS xi. 3.

THE view taken in this Lecture I hold to be important, not only in its practical and spiritual bearings, on which I chiefly dwell, but also in relation to some of the scientific questions which have been supposed to be here involved. It lifts, as I think, the divine record out of and above these human entanglements, and presents it, apart from all discoveries of successive ages, in the broad and general aspect which it was designed from the first and all along to wear, as unfolding the Creator's mind in the orderly subordination of the several parts of his creation to one another, with special reference to his intended dealings with the race of man. On this account I ask attention to what otherwise might appear to some to be an irrelevant metaphysical conceit.

It is proposed, then, to inquire what is implied in our really believing, as a matter of revelation, the fact of the creation. This may seem a very needless inquiry, in reference to a fact so easily understood. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” “The worlds were framed by the word of God.” Can any thing be easier than to comprehend and believe this great truth thus clearly revealed? Who can be at a loss to know what is meant by believing it? It is remarkable, however, that in speaking of

that faith whose power he celebrates as the most influential of all our principles of action, the apostle gives, as his first instance of it, our belief of this fact of the creation. "Through faith,"—that particular energetic faith, which so vividly realises its absent object, unseen and remote, as to invest it with all the force of a present and sensible impression,—through this precise faith, "which is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," "we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God; so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear."

Now, this faith is peculiar in several respects, and its peculiarity is as much to be observed in the belief of the fact of creation, as in the belief of the fact of redemption,—including, as such belief does, a reliance on the promises connected with that fact and ratified and sealed by it, springing out of a reliance on the person promising. It is especially peculiar in respect of its source, or of the evidence on which it rests. The truths which it receives, it receives on the evidence of testimony, as truths revealed, declared, and attested, by the infallible word of the living God.

This is a point of great importance, as it affects both the kind of assent which we give to these truths, and the kind and degree of influence which they exert over us. There is the widest possible difference between our believing certain truths as the result of reasoning or discovery, and our believing them on the direct assertion of a credible witness whom we see and hear,—especially if the witness be the very individual to whom the truths relate, and indeed himself their author. The truths themselves may be identically the same; but how essentially different is the state of the mind in accepting them; and how different the impression made by them on the mind when accepted.

I. The difference may be illustrated by a simple and familiar example. In the deeply interesting and beautiful

work of Paley on Natural Theology—for so it may still be characterised, in spite of lapse of time and change of taste—the author, in stating the argument for the being of a God, derived from the proofs of intelligence and design in nature, makes admirable use of an imaginary case respecting a watch. He supposes that, being previously unacquainted with such a work of art, you stumble upon it for the first time, as if by accident, in a desert. You proceed to exercise your powers of judgment and inference in regard to it. You hold it in your hand, and after exhausting your first emotions of wonder and admiration, you begin to examine its structure, to raise questions in your own mind, and to form conjectures. How did it come there, and how were its parts so curiously put together? You at once conclude that it did not grow there, and that it could not be fashioned by chance. You are not satisfied to be told that it has lain there for a long period,—from time immemorial,—for ever; that it has always been going on as it is going on now; that there is nothing really surprising in its movements and its mechanism; that it is just its nature to be what it is, and to do what it does. You utterly reject all such explanations as frivolous and absurd. You feel assured that the watch had a maker; and your busy and inquisitive spirit immediately sets itself restlessly to work, to form some conception as to what sort of person the maker of it must have been. You gather much of his character from the obvious character of his handiwork; you search in that handiwork for traces of his mind and his heart; you speculate concerning his plans and purposes; your fancy represents him to your eye; you think you understand all about him; you find the exercise of reasoning and discovery delightful, and you rejoice in the new views which it unfolds.

But now suppose that, while you are thus engaged, with the watch in your hand and your whole soul wrapt in meditative contemplation on the subject of its formation, a living person suddenly appears before you, and at once abruptly

announces himself, and says, It was I who made this watch—it was I who put it there. Is not your position instantly and completely changed? At first, perhaps, you are almost vexed and disappointed that the thread of your musing thoughts should be thus broken, and your airy speculations interrupted, and you should be told all at once on the instant, what you would have liked to find out for yourself,—that the riddle should be so summarily solved, and a plain tale substituted for many curious guesses. But you are soon reconciled to the change, and better pleased to have it so. The actual presence of the individual gives a new interest—the interest of a more vivid and intense reality—to the whole subject of your previous thoughts. Nor does this new impression depend merely upon the greater amount of information communicated; for the individual now before you may explicitly tell you no more than, in his absence, the watch itself had virtually told you already. Neither does it arise altogether from the greater certainty and assurance of the revelation which he makes to you; for in truth your own inferences, in so plain an instance of design, may be as infallible as any testimony could be. But there is something in the direct and immediate communication of the real person, speaking to you face to face, and with his living voice, which affects you very differently from a process of reasoning, however clear and unquestionable its results may be.

Your position, in fact, is now precisely reversed. Instead of questioning the watch concerning its maker, you now question the maker concerning his watch. You hear, not what the mechanism has to say of the mechanic, but what the mechanic has to say of the mechanism. You receive, perhaps, the same truths as before, but with a freshness and a force unknown before. They come to you,—not circuitously and at second hand, but straight from the very being most deeply concerned in them. They come home to you without any of that dim and vague impersonality—that abstract and ideal

remoteness—which usually characterises the conclusions of long argument and reasoning. They are now invested with that sense of reality, and those sensations and sentiments of personal concern, which the known face and voice of a living man inspire.

II. Now, let us apply these remarks to the matter in hand. We are all of us familiar with this idea, that in contemplating the works of creation, we should ascend from nature to nature's God. Everywhere we discern undoubted proofs of the unbounded wisdom, power, and goodness of the great Author of all things. Everywhere we meet with traces of just and benevolent design, which should suggest to us the thought of the Almighty Creator, and of his righteousness, truth, and love. It is most pleasing and useful to cultivate such a habit as this; much of natural religion depends upon it, and holy Scripture fully recognises its propriety. "The heavens declare the glory of God: the firmament sheweth his handiwork." "All thy works praise thee, Lord God Almighty." "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold—Who hath created these things?" "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches."

It is apparent, however, even in these and similar passages, that created things are mentioned, not as arguments, but rather as illustrations; not as suggesting the idea of God, the Creator, but as unfolding and expanding that idea, otherwise obtained.

And this is still more manifest in that passage of the Epistle to the Romans which particularly appeals to the fact of creation as evidence of the Creator's glory,—evidence sufficient to condemn the ungodly: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish

heart was darkened" (i. 20, 21). Here it is expressly said, that from the things that are made might be understood the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and Godhead ; so that atheists, idolaters, and worshippers of the creature, are without excuse. But why are they without excuse? Not because they failed to discover God, in this way, from his works, but because, when they knew God otherwise, they did not glorify him, as these very works might have continually taught them to do ;—not because they did not in this way acquire, but because they did not like in this way to retain, the knowledge of God.

For the fact of the creation is regarded in the Bible as a fact revealed ; and, as such, it is commended to our faith. Thus the scriptural method on this subject is exactly the reverse of what is called the natural. It is not to ascend from nature up to nature's God, but to descend, if we may so speak, from God to God's nature, or his works of nature ; not to hear the creation speaking of the Creator, but to hear the Creator speaking of the creation. We have not in the Bible an examination and enumeration of the wonders to be observed among the works of nature, and an argument founded upon these that there must be a God, and that he must be of a certain character, and must have had certain views in making what he has made. God himself appears, and tells us authoritatively who he is, and what he has done, and why he did it.

Thus "through faith we understand that the worlds were made by the word of God ; so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." We understand and believe this, not as a deduction of reasoning, but as a matter of fact, declared and revealed to us. For this is that act of the mind which, in a religious sense, is called faith. It involves in its very nature an exercise of trust or confidence in a living person,—of acquiescence in his word,—of reliance on his truth, on himself. It implies the committing of ourselves to him,—the casting of ourselves on him,—as faithful

in what he tells, and in what he promises. We believe on his testimony. We believe what he says, and because he says it. In thus simply receiving a fact declared by another, and that other fully credible and trustworthy, the mind is in a very different attitude and posture from that which it assumes when it reasons out the fact, as it were, by its own resources. There is far more of dependence and submission in the one case than in the other,—a more cordial and implicit recognition of a Being higher than we are,—a more unreserved surrender of ourselves. The one, in truth, is the act of a man, the other of a child. Now, in the kingdom of God—his kingdom of nature as well as his kingdom of grace,—we must be as little children. When I draw inferences for myself concerning the Author of creation,—when I reason out from his works the fact of his existence, and the chief attributes of his character,—I am conscious of a certain feeling of superiority. The Deity becomes almost, in a certain sense, my creature,—the product of my own elaborated process of thought. I am occupied more with my own reasonings than with the transcendent excellences of Him of whom I reason. The whole is very much an exercise of intellect, attended, certainly, with those emotions of beauty and sublimity which the exercise of the intellect on matters of taste calls forth;—but with scarcely anything more of the real apprehension of an unseen Being, in my conclusions respecting the author of nature, than in my premises respecting nature itself. The God whom I discover is like the dead abstract truth to which a train of demonstration leads. I myself alone have a distinct personality;—all else is little more than the working of my brain on its own imaginations.

But now, God speaks, and I am dumb. He opens his mouth, and I hold my peace. I bid my busy, speculative soul be quiet. I am still, and know that it is God. I now at once recognise a real and living Person, beyond and above myself. I take my station humbly, submissively at his feet. I learn

of him. And what he tells me now, in the way of direct personal communication from himself to me, has a weight and vivid reality infinitely surpassing all that any mere deductions from the closest reasoning could ever have. Now in very truth my "faith" does become "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Now at last I am brought into real personal contact with the Invisible One. And he speaks as one having authority. He whom now I personally know and see tells me of the things which he has made; and so tells me of them, that now they start forth before my eyes in a new light. The idea of their being not only his workmanship, but of his explaining them to me as his workmanship, assumes a distinctness—a prominence and power—which cannot fail to exercise a strong influence and exert a sovereign command over me, as a communication directly from him to me.

Such is that faith respecting the creation which alone can be of a really influential character. Thus only can we truly and personally know God as the Creator.

III. But it may be asked, Are we, then, not to use our reason on this subject at all? That cannot be; for the apostle himself enjoins us, however in respect of meekness we are to be like children, still in understanding to be men. Certainly we do well to search out and collect together all those features in creation which reflect the glory of the Creator. Nay, we may begin in this way to know God. It is true, indeed, that God has never, in point of fact, left himself to be thus discovered. He has always revealed himself, as he did at first, not circuitously by his works, but summarily and directly by his word. We may suppose, however, that you are suffered to grope your way through creation to the Creator. In that case you proceed, in the manner already described, to deduce or infer from the manifold plain proofs of design in nature, the idea of an intelligent author, and to draw conclusions from what you see of his works, respecting his character, purposes,

and plans. Still, even in this method of discovering God, if your faith is to be of an influential kind at all, you must proceed, when you have made the discovery, exactly to reverse the process by which you made it. Having arrived at the conception of a Creator, you must now go back again to the creation, taking the Creator himself along with you, as one with whom you have become personally acquainted, and hearing what he has to say concerning his own works. He may say no more than what you had previously discovered ; still, what he does say, you now receive, not as discovered by you, but as said by him. You leave the post of discovery and the chair of reasoning, and take the lowly stool of the disciple. And then, and not before, even on the principles of natural religion, do you fully understand what is the real import and the momentous bearing of the fact,—that a Being, infinitely wise and powerful, and having evidently a certain character, as holy, just, and good,—that such a Being made you,—and that he is himself telling you that he made you,—and all the things that are around you ; “so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear ;” the visible did not come from the visible ; it was not self-made. God tells you that.

Much more will this be felt, if we become personally acquainted with God otherwise than through the medium of his works. And so, in fact, we do.

Even apart from revelation,—on natural principles,—the first notion of a God is suggested in another way. It is suggested far more promptly and directly than it can be by a circuitous process of reasoning respecting the proofs of intelligence in creation. It is conscience within, not nature without, which first points to and proves a Deity. It is the Lawgiver, and not the Creator, that man first recognises,—the Governor, the righteous Judge. The moral sense involves the notion of a moral Ruler, independently altogether of the argument from creation. And the true position and purpose of that argument is, not to infer from his works of creation an unknown God,

as Creator, but to prove that the God already known as the moral Ruler is the Creator of all things,—or rather to show what, as the moral Ruler, he has to tell us in regard to the things which he has created. The truth is, when we go to the works and creatures of God, we go, not to discover him, but as having already discovered and known him. We must, therefore, go in the spirit of implicit and submissive faith, not to question them concerning him, but to hear and observe what he has to say to us concerning them, or to say to us, in them, concerning himself.

But still further, we go now to the record of creation, not only recognising God through the evidence of his works and the intimations of the conscience or moral sense, but acquainted with him through the testimony of his own word. In that word, he reveals himself, first as the Lawgiver, and then as the Saviour. The first word he spoke to man in paradise was the law, the second was the glorious Gospel; he made himself known first as the Sovereign, and then as the Redeemer. Now, therefore, it is in the character of the God thus known that he speaks to us concerning the creation of all things; and our faith as to creation now consists,—not in our believing that all things were and must have been made by a God,—but in our believing that they were made by this God; and believing it on the ground of his own infallible assurance, given personally by himself to us. This God we are to see in all things. We are to hear his voice saying to us, in reference to every object,—I created it; I made it, such as you see it, and for the purpose for which you must perceive it to be manifestly intended; and I am now telling you that I did so.

Thus, by faith, we are to recognise, instead of a dim remote abstraction, a real living being; personally present with us, and speaking to us of his works, as well as in them and by them. We are to exercise a personal reliance on him, as thus present and thus speaking to us—a reliance on his faithfulness,

in what he says to us concerning his character and doings in creation. Then assuredly our faith will make more vividly and tangibly intelligible the great fact that he made each thing and all things, and will give to that fact more of a real hold over us, and far more of intense practical power, than, with our ordinary vague views of the subject, we can at all beforehand conceive. Nor will it hamper or hinder the freest possible inquiry, on the side of natural science, if only it confines itself to its legitimate function of ascertaining facts before it theorises. For the facts it ascertains may modify, and have modified, the interpretation put on what God has told us in his word. And he meant it to be so. He did not intend revelation to supersede inquiry, and anticipate its results. Of course, his revelation must be consistent with the results of our inquiry,—as it has always hitherto, in the long run, been found to be. But it was inevitable that our understanding of his revelation should be open to progressive readjustment, as regards the development of scientific knowledge, while the revelation itself, as the Creator's explanation of his creation for all mankind, remains ever the same.

IV. Thus, then, in a spiritual view, and for spiritual purposes, the truth concerning God as the Creator must be received, not as a discovery of our own reason, following a train of thought, but as a direct communication from a real person, even from the living and present God. This is not a merely theoretical and artificial distinction. It is practically most important. Consider the subject of creation simply in the light of an argument of natural philosophy, and all is vague and dim abstraction. It may be close and cogent as a demonstration in mathematics, but it is as cold and unreal; or, if there be emotion at all, it is but the emotion of a fine taste, and a sensibility for the grand or the lovely in nature and thought. But consider the momentous fact in the light of a direct message from the Creator himself to you,—regard him as standing near to you, and himself telling you, personally

and face to face, all that he did on that wondrous creation-week,—are you not differently impressed and affected?

1. More particularly,—see first of all, what weight this single idea, once truly and vividly realised, must add to all the other communications which he makes to us on other subjects. Does he speak to us concerning other matters, intimately touching our present and future weal? Does he tell us of our condition in respect of him, and of his purposes in respect of us? Does he enforce the majesty of his law? Does he press the overtures of his Gospel? Does he threaten, or warn, or exhort, or encourage, or command, or entreat, or tenderly expostulate, or straitly and authoritatively charge? Oh! how in every such case is his appeal enhanced with tenfold intensity in its solemnity, its pathos, and its power, if we regard him as in the very same breath expressly telling us,—I who now speak to you so earnestly and so affectionately, I created all things,—I created you. To the sinner, whom he is seeking out in his lost estate, whom he is reproofing as a holy lawgiver, and condemning as a righteous judge, and yet pitying with all a father's unquenchable compassion, how awful and yet how moving is the consideration, that he who is speaking to him as a counsellor and a friend, is speaking to him also as the Creator! And while he bids the sinner, in accents the most gracious, turn and live, he says to him still always,—It is thy Maker, and the Maker of all things, who bids thee, at thy peril, turn. And is there any one of you who are his saints and servants disquieted and cast down? Is there not comfort in the thought, that thy Maker is thy husband and thy redeemer? Is there not especial comfort in his telling thee so himself? Is there any thing in all the earth to make thee afraid? Dost thou not hear him saying to thee,—I, thy Saviour, thy God made thee, made it, made all things? It is my creature, as thou art, and it cannot hurt thee, if I am with thee.

On this principle we may, to a large extent, explain the importance which believers attach to the glorious fact, that he

who saves them has revealed himself to them, and is revealing himself, as the Creator. All must have remarked, in reading the devotional parts of the Bible, such as the book of Psalms, how constantly the psalmist comforts and strengthens himself, and animates himself in the face of his enemies, by this consideration,—that his help comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth,—that his God made the heavens. He made all things; the very things, therefore, that are most hostile and perilous, his God made. This is his security. The God whom he knows as his own, made all things, and is reminding him, whenever any thing alarms or threatens him, that he made it. And if now, my Christian brother, the God who made all things, evil as well as good,—sickness, pain, poverty, distress,—is your Saviour; if he is ever seen by you, and his voice is heard telling you, even of that which presently afflicts you, that he made it as he made you,—how complete is your confidence.

When God appeared to Job, in such a way that Job himself exclaimed, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee;” it was mainly, if not exclusively, as the Creator that he revealed himself. Coming forth to finish the discussion between Job and his friends, the Lord enlarges and expatiates on all his wondrous works,—on the power and the majesty of his creation. On this topic he dwells, speaking to Job personally concerning it, conversing with him face to face as a friend. And the full recognition of God as doing so, is enough both to humble and comfort the patriarch,—to remove every cloud,—to abase him in dust and ashes,—and to exalt him again in all the confidence of prayer.

2. Again, secondly,—on the other hand, observe what weight this idea, if fully realised, must have, if we ever regard the Lord himself as personally present, and saying to us, in special reference to each of the things which he has made,—I created it, and I am now reminding you, and testifying to you, that it was I who made it. What sacredness will this thought

stamp on every object in nature,—if only by the power of the Spirit, and through the belief of the truth, we are made really and personally acquainted with the living God ; if we know him thus as the Lawgiver, the Saviour, the Judge.

We go forth amid the glories and the beauties of this earth and these heavens, which he has so marvellously framed. We are not left merely to trace the dead and empty footsteps which mark that he once was there. He is there still, telling us even now that his hand framed all that we see ; and telling us why he did so. Thus, and thus only, do we walk with God, amid all that is grand and lovely in the scenes of creation ; not by rising, in our sentimental dream of piety, to the notion of a remote Creator, dimly seen in his works, but by taking the Creator along with us, whenever we enter into these scenes, and seeing his works in him. It is true, there is a tongue in every breeze of summer, a voice in every song of the bird, a silent eloquence in every green field and quiet grove, which tell of God as the great maker of them all ; but after all, they tell of him as a God afar off, and still they speak of him as secondary, merely, and supplementary to themselves,—as if he were inferred from them, and not they from him. But, in our habit of mind, let this order be just reversed. Let us conceive of God as telling us concerning them as his works. While they reveal and interpret him, let him reveal and interpret them. And whenever we meet with any thing that pleases our eye, and affects our heart, let us consider God himself, our God and our Father, as informing us respecting that very thing : I made it,—I made it what it is,—I made it what it is for you.

And if this vivid impression of reality, in our recognition of God as the Creator, would be salutary in our communing with nature's works, much more would it be so in our use of nature's manifold gifts and bounties. "Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving ; for it is sanctified by the word of God and

prayer" (1 Tim. iv. 4, 5). Still it is to be received and used as the creature of God, and as solemnly declared and attested to be so, by God himself, in the very moment of our using it. If we fully realised this consideration; if, on the instant when we were about to use, as we have been wont, any of the creatures of God provided for our accommodation, God himself were to appear personally present before us, and were to say, Son,—Daughter,—I created this thing which you are about to use,—this cup of wine which you are about to drink, this piece of money that you are about to spend, this brother or sister with whom you are now conversing,—and I testify this to you, at this particular moment,—I, your Lord and your God,—I created them,—such as they are,—for those ends which they are plainly designed to serve;—would we go on to make the very same use of the creature that we intended to make? Or would not our hand be arrested, and our mouth shut, and our spirit made to stand in awe, so that we would not sin?

Let none imagine that this is an ideal and fanciful state of feeling. It is really nothing more than the true exercise of that faith by which "we understand that the worlds were made by the word of God; so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear;" and it is the preparation for the scene which John saw in vision, when, being in the Spirit, he beheld, and lo! a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne, and round about the throne the emblems of redeeming love appeared, with the representatives of the redeemed Church giving glory to him that sat on the throne, worshipping him that liveth for ever and ever, casting their crowns before the throne, and saying, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. iv.)

My plan does not require me to enter at any length, if in-

deed at all, into the vexed questions which have clustered around the Mosaic cosmogony ; questions as to the relations of science and revelation which I own myself incompetent to discuss. I have tried in this Lecture to indicate the point of view from which, as it seems to me, the narrative in the first two chapters of Genesis ought to be regarded. It is God's own account of the origin of the present mundane system, given by inspiration, for all times and for all men. And it is his account, specially adapted by himself to the end, not of gratifying speculative curiosity, but of promoting godly edification. Therefore, there is purposely excluded from it whatever might identify it with any particular stage of advancement and enlightenment among mankind. It is this very exclusion, indeed, which gives to it a breadth and universality fitting it equally for all systems, as well as for all ages. Then again, as on the one hand it is not the design of God to tell us here all that we might wish to have learned from him respecting this earth's long past history, or even respecting the adjustment of its present order,—so, on the other hand, it is his design to present this last topic to us chiefly in its bearing on the great scheme of providence, including probation and redemption, which his revealed word is meant to unfold. He tells the story of our birth only partially. And in telling it, he casts it in the mould that best adapts it to that progressive development of his moral government which his inspired Scriptures are about to trace.

Hence, amid dark obscurity hanging over many things, the salient prominence given to the Word as the Light of the world, its light of life,—to the Spirit moving in the ancient chaos,—to the satisfaction of the Eternal at each step in the creative work,—to the succession of six days and the rest of the seventh.

And hence also, as regards man, the twofold account of his origin,—that in the first chapter bringing out his high and heavenly relation to the Supreme, whose image he wears, and

that in the second chapter describing rather his more earthly relations, and the functions of his animal nature. For these two accounts, so far from being inconsistent with one another, are in reality the complements of one another. Both of them are essential to a complete divinely-drawn portrait of man as at first he stood forth among the creatures ; spiritually allied to God, in one view, yet in another view, the offspring as well as the lord of earth. Both therefore appropriately culminate,—the one in the Sabbath Institute, the pledge and means of man's divine life,—and the other in that ordinance of marriage, peculiar to him alone, in which his social earthly life finds all its pure and holy joy.

These particulars will come up again for consideration. I notice them now because I would like my first paper to be studied as having an important bearing on the subjects to which they relate.

II.

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD AND MAN VIEWED ON ITS HEAVENLY SIDE.

GENESIS I. 1; II. 3.

THIS divine record of creation, remarkable for the most perfect simplicity, has been sadly complicated and embarrassed by the human theories and speculations with which it has unhappily become entangled. To clear the way, therefore, at the outset, to get rid of many perplexities, and leave the narrative unencumbered for pious and practical uses, let its limited design be fairly understood, and let certain explanations be frankly made.

I. In the first place, the object of this inspired cosmogony, or account of the world's origin, is not scientific but religious. Hence it was to be expected that, while nothing contained in it could ever be found really and in the long run to contradict science, the gradual progress of discovery might give occasion for apparent temporary contradictions. The current interpretation of the Divine record, in such matters, will naturally, and indeed, must necessarily, accommodate itself to the actual state of scientific knowledge and opinion at the time; so that, when science takes a step in advance, revelation may seem to be left behind. The remedy here is to be found in the exercise of caution, forbearance, and suspense, on the part both of the student of Scripture and of the student of science; and, so far as Scripture is concerned, it is often safer and better to dismiss or to qualify old interpretations, than instantly to adopt

new ones. Let the student of science push his inquiries still further, without too hastily assuming, in the meantime, that the result to which he has been brought demands a departure from the plain sense of Scripture; and let the student of Scripture give himself to the exposition of the narrative in its moral and spiritual application, without prematurely committing himself, or it, to the particular details or principles of any scientific school.

II. Then again, in the second place, let it be observed that the essential facts in this Divine record are,—the recent date assigned to the existence of man on the earth, the previous preparation of the earth for his habitation, the gradual nature of the work, and the distinction and succession of days during its progress. These are not, and cannot be, impugned by any scientific discoveries. What history of ages previous to that era this globe may have engraved in its rocky bosom, revealed or to be revealed by the explosive force of its central fires, Scripture does not say. What countless generations of living organisms teemed in the chaotic waters, or brooded over the dark abyss, it is not within the scope of the inspiring Spirit to tell. There is room and space for whole volumes of such matter, before the Holy Ghost takes up the record. Nor is it necessary to suppose that all continuity of the animal life which had sprung into being, in or out of the waters, was broken at the time when the earth was finally fashioned for man's abode. It is enough that then, for the first time, the animals of sea, and air, and land, with which man was to be conversant, were created for his use,—the fish, the fowls, the beasts, which were to minister to his enjoyment and to own his dominion.

III. And finally, in the third place, let it be borne in mind that the sacred narrative of the creation is evidently, in its highest character, moral, spiritual, and prophetic. The original relation of man, as a responsible being, to his Maker, is directly taught; his restoration from moral chaos to spiritual beauty is figuratively represented; and as a prophecy, it has

an extent of meaning which will be fully unfolded only when "the times of the restitution of all things" (Acts iii. 21) have arrived. Until then, we must be contented with a partial and inadequate view of this, as of other parts of the sacred volume; for "the sure word of prophecy," though a light "whereunto we do well to take heed," is still but "as a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day-star arise in our hearts" (2 Peter i. 19). The exact literal sense of much that is now obscure or doubtful, as well as the bearing and importance of what may seem insignificant or irrelevant, will then clearly appear. The creation of this world anew, after its final baptism of fire, will be the best comment on the history of its creation at first, after the chaos of water. The manner as well as the design of the earth's formation of old, out of the water, will be understood at last, when it emerges once more from the wreck and ruin of the conflagration which yet awaits it,—“a new earth, with new heavens, wherein righteousness is to dwell” (2 Pet. iii. 13).

Our present concern, therefore, is with the moral and spiritual aspect of this sacred narrative. Our business is with man,—with the position originally assigned to him, by creation, in the primeval kingdom of nature, and the place to which he is restored, by redemption, in the remedial kingdom of grace. Of his abode in the renewed kingdom of glory, it is but the shadowy outline which we can in the meantime trace; but, so far as it goes, it is interesting and suggestive.

Thus, then, let us view the scene which the opening section of Genesis presents to us.

There is a plain distinction between the first verse and the subsequent part of this passage. The first verse speaks of creation, strictly so called, and of the creation of all things,—the formation of the substance, or matter, of the heavens and the earth, out of nothing;—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The rest of the passage speaks

of creation in the less exact sense of the term ; describing the changes wrought on matter previously existing ; and it confines itself, apparently, to one part of the universe—our solar system, and especially to this one planet—our earth, concerning which, chiefly, God sees fit to inform us.

The first verse, then, contains a very general announcement ; in respect of time, without date,—in respect of space, without limits. The expression, “in the beginning,” fixes no period ; and the expression, “the heavens and the earth,” admits of no restriction. For, though heaven denotes sometimes the atmosphere, or the visible starry expanse above, and, at other times, the dwelling-place of God and of the blessed ; yet, when heaven and earth are joined, as in this text, all things are evidently intended (Ps. cxxxi. 2, etc.) And the announcement here is, that at an era indefinitely remote, the whole matter of the universe was called into being. It is not eternal,—it had a beginning. God has not merely, in the long course of ages, wrought wonderful changes on matter previously existing. Originally, and at the first, he made the matter itself.

At the period referred to in the second verse, the materials for the fair structure of this world which we inhabit are in being. But they are lying waste. Three things are wanted to render the earth such as God can approve—order, life, and light. The earth is “without form”—a shapeless mass. It is “void,”—empty, or destitute of life. It has “darkness” all around its deep chaotic “waters.” One good sign only appears. There is a movement on the surface, but deep-searching. “The Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters.”

We have here the first indication in the Bible of a plurality of Persons in the unity of the Godhead ; and, in the chapter throughout we trace the same great and glorious doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity, pervading the entire

narrative. This truth, indeed, is not so much directly stated in the Scriptures as it is all along assumed ; and we might reasonably expect it to be so. God is not, in the written word, introduced for the first time to men. He speaks, and is spoken of, as one previously known, because previously revealed. And, if the doctrine of the Trinity be true, he must have been known, more or less explicitly, as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. An express and formal declaration, then, of this mystery of his being, was not needed, nor was it to be expected. The most natural and convincing proof of it, in these circumstances, is to trace it, as from the very first taken for granted and recognised, in all that is said of the divine proceedings. Now, in this passage, we find precisely such intimations of it as might have been anticipated. Not to speak of the form of the word "God," which, in the original, is a plural noun joined to a singular verb, we have the remarkable phrase (ver 26), "Let us make ;" and, in the very outset, we have mention made of God ;—of his WORD, "God said ;"—and of his Spirit, "the Spirit of God moved." So, also, it is said, in the Psalms (xxxiii. vi.), "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the hosts of them by the breath," or Spirit, "of his mouth."

The gradual process by which the earth is brought into a right state may be traced according to the division of days. But there is another principle of division, very simple and beautiful, suggested by the repeated expression, "God saw that it was good." That expression may be regarded as marking the successive steps or stages of the divine work, at which the Creator pauses, that he may dwell on each finished portion, as at last he dwells on the finished whole, with a holy and benevolent complacency. The phrase occurs seven times (ver. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It does not divide the work exactly as the days divide it. On the second day it does not occur at all ; and on the third and sixth days it

occurs twice. The work is divided among the days, so that each day has something definite to be done,—something complete in itself. 1. Light,—2. Air (the elastic firmament or sky),—3. Earth (dry land as separated from the sea),—4. the Luminaries in heaven as means of light and measures of time,—5. Fish and Fowl,—6. Beasts, and MAN himself,—these are the works of the successive days. The relation, however, of the several parts to the whole, is better seen by noting the points at which the divine expression of satisfaction is inserted : “God saw that it was good.”

The main design of the whole work is to supply the wants or defects of the chaotic earth. These were three :—the want of order, of life, and of light. Light is first provided ; then order is given that the earth may be fitted for the habitation of living creatures ; and finally, living creatures are placed in it.

Now, the series of operations by which this threefold object is accomplished, is exactly marked by the intervals at which it is said, “God saw that it was good.” Thus, I. On the introduction of LIGHT, which is a simple act, the Creator’s joy is expressed emphatically, but only once (ver. 4). II. The ORDERING of the world, however, is a more complicated and elaborate process. In the first place, there must be the adjustment of the waters ; that is, on the one hand the separation of the cloudy vapour constituting the material heavens above, from the waters on the earth’s surface below, by the air, or elastic atmosphere, being interposed ; and on the other hand, the separation on the earth’s surface of the dry land from the sea. Secondly, there must be the arrangement of the dry land itself, which is to be clothed with all manner of vegetation, and stored with all sorts of reproductive trees and plants. And thirdly, there must be the establishment of the right relation which the heavens and the heavenly bodies are to have to the earth as the instruments of its light, and the rulers of its seasons. Accordingly, at each of

these three stages of this part of the work,—the reducing of the shapeless mass of earth to ORDER,—the language of divine approbation is employed (ver. 10, 12, 18). III. The formation of LIFE also, or of the living beings for whose use the world is made,—admits of a similar sub-division. First, the fishes and the fowls ~~are~~ produced; secondly, the terrestrial beasts; and thirdly, man himself. And still, as the glorious work rises higher and higher, there is at each step the pause of divine congratulation; as, in the end and over all, there is the full contentment of Infinite Wisdom; “rejoicing in the habitable parts of the earth, his delights being with the sons of men” (ver. 21, 25, 31, and Prov. viii. 31).

The following scheme will show this division clearly:—

God saw that it was good on the production of—

1. (ver. 4.)	I. LIGHT.	1. Light.
2. (ver. 10.)	II. ORDER, in the arrange- ment of	2. The firmament divid- ing the waters above and below.
3. (ver. 12.)		3. The dry land, or fer- tile soil, separated from the sea.
4. (ver. 18.)		4. The heavenly bodies adjusted in relation to earth.
5. (ver. 21.)	III. LIFE, in the existence of	5. Fishes and fowls.
6. (ver. 25.)		6. Terrestrial beasts.
7. (ver. 31.)		7. MAN.

I. The first step in this glorious process, is the breaking in of LIGHT on the gloom in which the earth was shrouded (ver. 3-5). In this step the ETERNAL WORD comes forth from the bosom of Deity. He “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah v. 2),—“the Word who was in the beginning with God and was God” (John i. 1-3),—he is that word which went out from God, when “GOD SAID, Let there be light.” For this is not the utterance of a dead sentence, but the coming forth of the living WORD. In the Word was life, and this life in the Word,—this LIVING WORD,—was the

“light.” Immediately, without the intervention of those luminaries in which afterwards light was stored and centered, the LIVING WORD himself going forth was light,—the natural light of the earth then : as afterwards, again coming forth, he became to men the light of their salvation.

In this light God delighted as good ; for the light is none other than that very Eternal Wisdom who says ;—“ The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old, and I was daily,”—from day to day, as the marvellous work of these six days went on,—“ I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him ” (Prov. viii. 22, 30). Such was the mutual ineffable complacency of the Godhead, when the Word went forth in the creation, as the light, and when all things began to be made by him (John i. 3, 4). And in this first going forth of the Eternal Word, the distinction of light and darkness, of day and night, for the new earth, began (Ps. civ. 2). This was the first day—the first alternation of evening and morning ;—not perhaps the first revolution of this globe on its axis, but its first revolution, after its chaotic darkness, under the beams of that divine light, which, shining on earth’s surface as it passed beneath the glorious brightness, chased, from point to point, the ancient gloom away.

II. To light succeeds ORDER. Form, or shape, or due arrangement, is given to the natural economy of this lower world, and that by three successive processes.

1. In the first place, the waters are arranged (ver. 6-10). The earth is girt round with a firmament, or gaseous atmosphere ; at once pressing down, by its weight, the waters on the surface, and supporting, by its elasticity, the floating clouds and vapours above ; and so forming the visible heaven, or the azure sky (Ps. civ. 3). This is the work of the second day. Then, a bed is made for the waters, which before covered the earth, but which now, subsiding into the place prepared for them, lay bare a surface of dry land (Ps. civ. 6-13). This is done on the third day. And thus, by a twofold process, the

waters are reduced to order. In the language of Job, "He girdeth up the waters in his thick clouds ; and the cloud is not rent under them : he holdeth back the face of his throne, and spreadeth his cloud upon it." This surely must allude to the separating of the waters above the firmament from the waters under the firmament. And as to these last, the description proceeds, "He hath compassed the waters with bounds, until the day and night come to an end" (Job xxvi. 8-10). So, also, in another place, the Lord, challenging vain man to answer him, asks, "Who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth as if it had issued out of the womb ; when I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddling band for it?" Here we have plainly the firmament dividing the waters. And I "brake up for it," for the sea that once covered the earth, "my decreed place, and set bars and doors, and said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther ; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed." Here we have with equal plainness the gathering together of the waters and the appearing of the dry land (Job xxxviii. 8-11). The same twofold process in disposing of the waters is indicated by the psalmist ;—"O give thanks therefore to him, that by his wisdom made the heavens, for his mercy endureth for ever ; to him that stretched out the earth above the waters, for his mercy endureth for ever" (Ps. cxxxvi. 5, 6) ;—and by the Apostle Peter ;—"By the word of the Lord, the heavens were of old, and the earth, standing out of the water and in the water" (2 Pet. iii. 5).

2. Secondly, the dry land is next itself prepared (ver. 11-13). The green and fertile earth, rising out of the waters, is stored with all the seeds and elements of prodigal vegetation (Ps. civ. 14-18). This also is on the third day.

3. In the third place, on the fourth day, the heavenly bodies, in their relation to this earth, are formed or adjusted. The light, hitherto supplied by the immediate presence of the WORD, which had gone forth on the first day—the very Glory

of the Lord, which long afterwards shone in the wilderness, in the temple, and on the Mount of Transfiguration, and which may yet again illumine the world—the light, thus originally provided without created instrumentality, by the LIVING WORD himself, now that the chaotic mists are cleared away from the earth's surface, is to be henceforward dispensed through the natural agency of second causes. A subordinate fountain and storehouse of light is found for the earth. The light is now concentrated in the sun, as its source, and in the moon and stars, which reflect the sun's beams; and these luminaries, by their fixed order, are made to rule and regulate all movements here below (Ps. civ. 19-23). They are appointed “for signs,”—not for tokens of divination (Isa. xlv. 25; Jer. x. 2),—but for marks and indications of the changes that go on in the natural world;—and “for seasons,”—for the distinction of day and night, of summer and winter, seed-time and harvest (Jer. xxxi. 35). Again, therefore, let us “give thanks to him that made great lights, for his mercy endureth for ever; the sun to rule by day, for his mercy endureth for ever; the moon and stars to rule by night, for his mercy endureth for ever” (Ps. cxxxvi. 7-9).

Thus, all things are ready for living beings to be formed—those living beings which belong to the social economy of which MAN is head.

III. Accordingly, LIFE—life in abundance—is now produced. For the Eternal Word, or Wisdom (Prov. viii. 22-31), in the whole of this work of creation, in which he was intimately present with the Father, rejoiced especially in the earth as habitable; and above all, “his delights were with the sons of men.” In the first place, in the waters, and from the waters, he causes fishes and fowls to spring:—fishes to move in the bosom of the sea, and fowls to float in the liquid air and fly abroad in the open firmament of heaven. This he does on the fifth day (ver. 20-23). Secondly, on the sixth, he causeth all beasts to be produced from the earth (ver. 24,

25). And, in the third place, on the sixth day also, he creates MAN (ver. 26, 27).

These three orders or classes of living beings are severally pronounced good. But man is specially blessed (ver. 26, 27). There is deliberation in heaven respecting his creation: "Let us make man." He is created after a high model—"after our likeness." He is invested with dominion over the creatures: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." He is formed for holy matrimony, for dwelling in families: "male and female"—one male and one female—"created he them."

Thus, in four particulars, is man exalted above the other animals. In the first place, the counsels of the Godhead have respect to man. To his creation, as well as to his redemption, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost consent. Then, secondly, the image of God is reflected in him,—in his capacity of intelligence, his uprightness of condition, and his immaculate purity of character,—in his knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Eph. iv. 24 ; Col. iii. 10). A third distinction is, that the other animals are subjected to him,—not to his tyranny as now, but to his mild and holy rule ;—as they shall be when sinners are consumed out of the earth, and the wicked are no more (Ps. civ. 35 ; viii. 6-8 ; Rom. viii. 20-22). While his fourth and final privilege is, that marriage, and all its attendant blessings of society, are ordained for him. This the prophet Malachi testifies, when, sternly rebuking his countrymen for the prevailing sin of adultery and the light use of divorce, he appeals against the man who shall "deal treacherously with the wife of his youth,"—"his companion and the wife of his covenant,"—to the original design and purpose of God in creation. "Did not he make one?"—a single pair,—“yet had he the residue of the spirit,”—the excellency or abundance of the breath of life. "Wherefore, then, did he make one?"—limiting himself to the creation of

a single pair?—"That he might seek a goodly seed,"—or in other words, that holy matrimony,—based upon the creation of the one male and the one female, and the destination of them to be "one flesh,"—might purify and bless the social state of man (Mal. ii. 14-16).

Such was the primitive constitution of life in this world. Man stood forth, godlike and social, having under him, as in God's stead, all the creatures ; and for his life, and for theirs, that food was appointed which the earth was to bring forth (ver. 29, 30). The two previous stages in the creation are subservient to this last. Light and order are means, in order to life, which is the end. Life—animal, intellectual, moral, spiritual, social, divine—life is the crown and consummation of all. The Creator beholds it, and is satisfied, and rests.

"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made ; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it ; because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made" (Gen. ii. 1-3).

The rest of God is not physical repose after weariness or fatigue, nor is it absolute inactivity. During all the period of his rest, from that first day of rest downwards until now, he worketh still (John v. 17) ; and he must continually work for the continual preservation of his creatures (Ps. civ. 28, 29). But he pauses from his work of creation,—from the creation of new kinds and orders of beings ; though he still carries on his work of providence. He rests from all his work which he has made. He rests and is "refreshed," (Exod. xxxi. 17). And his original day of rest is blessed and sanctified.

Into the rest of God, with all its blessedness and sanctity, man at first might enter ; and hence the seventh day, as the day which was the beginning of the rest of God, became the

"Sabbath made for man" (Exod. xx. 11 ; Mark ii. 27). To the people of God still, in every age, there is a promise left, that they shall again enter into his rest. And the promise is still subsisting. For the rest of Canaan was not that rest, but only its type and shadow. So the Apostle Paul argues, building his argument on that solemn denunciation in the ninety-fifth Psalm ;—"I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest." "For if Joshua had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Heb. iv. 8, 9). And as the rest still remaineth for the people of God, so also the day of rest, which is its type and earnest ;—the blessed and holy Sabbath.

Such is the unanswerable reasoning, as it would seem, of the inspired apostle, founded upon the Lord's appeal to the Israelites, when he exhorts them to hear his voice. "Harden not your heart," is the voice of God, their Maker, "as your fathers did, who provoked me in the wilderness, and to whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest." Harden not your hearts, lest you also come short of that rest. But were not they who were thus addressed already in possession of that rest into which God swore that their fathers should not enter? Certainly they were, if that rest was the rest of Canaan which Joshua gave them ; in which case God "would not have spoken of another day" (Heb. iv. 8). But he does speak of "another day," when he says, even to those who were dwelling in the rest which Joshua gave them, "To-day, if ye will hear my voice, harden not your hearts, lest to you, as to your fathers, I swear in my wrath that ye shall not enter into my rest." This God would not have said, if Joshua had really given them that rest with reference to which he "swore in his wrath." It was a rest, therefore, different from that which Joshua gave that the Lord had in view, when he swore to the fathers in the wilderness that they should not enter into his rest ; and their exclusion

from the rest which Joshua gave, was but a presage of their exclusion from a rest infinitely more precious. This was a rest from which even they who did actually enter into the rest that Joshua gave, might yet be for ever debarred. In a word, it was his own rest. "My rest," says the Lord.

Now this rest has been long prepared. For "the works were finished from the foundation of the world ; and he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, and God did rest on the seventh day from all his works" (Heb. iv. 3, 4). Of this original rest it is, and not of any image of it afterwards appointed, that God speaks when he says, "If they shall enter into my rest." No rest hitherto given on earth,—either by Joshua to the Old Testament Church, or by Jesus to the New,—is or can be the rest of God, into which his people, if they come not short through unbelief, are to enter. That rest remaineth for them, after they have ceased from their works, as God did from his (Heb. iv. 10). And the type or pledge of it remaineth also ;—perpetual and unchangeable, as the promise of the rest itself ;—the type and pledge of it, instituted from the beginning, in the hallowed rest of the weekly Sabbath.

Through the help of this Sabbatic Institution, if only we obtain a spiritual and sympathising insight into its significancy, we may enter into the rest of God by faith, and in the spirit, even now, as we realise the blessed complacency of the Creator, rejoicing in his works.

Pause, therefore, O my soul ! at every stage of the wondrous process here described, and especially at its close ; and behold how good it is ! See how all was fitted for thee ; and what a being art thou, so fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. cxxxix. 14) ; thyself a little world ; and for thy sake this great world made ! How marvellous are God's works ! How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God ! Let me see, as God saw, everything which he has made. Behold, it is very good. And blessed and joyful is the rest which succeeds.

Man, however, who was the crown, has become the curse of this earth. The work of God has been destroyed ; and he must create anew. And it is, first of all, man himself that he must remodel and reform. The chaos now is not in matter but in mind,—not in the substance of this earth, but in the soul of man. In that world now there is darkness, disorder, death. But “in the WORD is life.”

And, in the first place, “the life is the light of men.” He shines into the darkened understanding, and all is light—“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. iv. 6). The glory of God, the true and living God, is seen in the Living Incarnate Word, the man Christ Jesus, the light of life, the author of salvation. “I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes seeth thee” (Job xlii. 5,—seeth thee in Christ, the Holy One, the Just, the Saviour.

Again, secondly, by the same Living Word, the disorder of the soul is remedied. Christ, the Sun of Righteousness,—God in Christ,—becomes the centre of attraction. Away from that centre, all the powers of the soul move and mingle irregularly. Restore the balance, by making God supreme, and all again is adjusted rightly ; things above and things below are separated ; the inconstant waves of passion retire, and leave the solid ground of principle ; and the glory of heaven rules and blesses the whole man.

Finally, in the third place, the end of all this is life,—the life of the soul,—its life with Christ in God (Eph. ii. 1 ; Col. iii. 3). Now the life of the soul is love,—for the soul lives in being loved, and in loving ; and God is revealed to the darkened soul, and restored to his supremacy in the disordered soul, in order that the dead soul may be quickened, so as to feel and return his love.

Such is the new creation of the soul, after the image of

God, in respect of knowledge or light, righteousness or order, and holiness or life, which is love. And this new creation being finished, a new rest follows ; a rest of God ; a rest in God ; a rest with God ;—as now a reconciled Father and all-satisfying portion. Into this rest let my weary spirit enter. It is mine in Christ, in whom, believing, I am created anew.

Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee " (Ps. cxvi. 7).

But after all this, and beyond it all, there still "remaineth a rest for the people of God." For we cherish the sure hope, that when this work of new creation in the souls of the redeemed shall be ended, the face of the earth itself shall be again renewed for their habitation ; and the Lord shall again rest, and rejoice in all that he has made, blessing and hallowing a new and better Sabbath in our regenerated world (Ps. civ. 30).

Meanwhile, the primitive institution of the Sabbath,—as the sign of that rest into which spiritually and by faith we enter now, as well as the foretaste of the rest which remaineth for us in the world to come,—is surely a delightful truth ; and its observance cannot but be a precious privilege. This world, with all that it contains, was made for man. Man himself was made for God, for entering into God's rest. And that he might all the better do so, the Sabbath was made for him. "God blessed the Sabbath-day and hallowed it." The blessing is not recalled, the consecration is not repealed. There remaineth a rest unto the people of God,—and a day of rest. Let us not fall short of the rest hereafter. Let us not despise the day of rest now.

III.

THE CREATION OF MAN
VIEWED AS ON THE SIDE OF EARTH ; AND HIS
EARTHLY ORIGIN AND RELATIONS.

GENESIS ii. 4-25.

THIS is a separate and independent account of the origin of man ; quite distinct, and meant to be distinct, from the former. The two, when fairly viewed, are not at all inconsistent with one another : they are rather supplementary to one another. In the first, man comes forth in his high spiritual or heavenly nature, as allied to God and capable of intercourse with God ; in the second he appears as “ of the earth, earthy ” (1 Cor. xv. 47) ;* having an earthly origin and earthly relations. He is godlike, in respect of the divine proposal and decree,—“ Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” But he is also “ a living soul ;” an animal like his co-occupiers of the earth ; with animal propensities and animal connections. And it is that aspect of his nature and condition which this chapter brings out, to balance the higher ideal suggested by the narrative that precedes it.

This may partly explain a puzzle which was once more troublesome than it is likely to be now. For it is to be observed, that throughout this last account, God is called by a name not used in the preceding section ; the name “ LORD,” or “ Jehovah,” being joined to the name “ God.” The reason may be this. The single name “ God,” denoting power or might, is more suitable while the process of creation, by God’s

* See “ Life in a Risen Saviour,” where I have expounded this passage.

mighty power, is described, as it were, on the side of his sovereign creative fiat, "Let it be," "Let us make." Now, however, in reviewing the work as complete, and entering into its providential phase, the additional idea involved in the name "Jehovah"—that of self-existence and unchangeable majesty, with special reference to his providence—becomes appropriate. All things are made by him as the Almighty God. They subsist by him as being also the everlasting Jehovah, "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." "I am Jehovah, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. iii. 6).

A similar distinction is intimated in the Lord's first introduction of himself to Moses (Exod. vi. 3); "I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah was I not known to them." In his dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God chiefly manifested himself as the Almighty Creator. In what he did, and in what he promised, he asserted his prerogative of omnipotence. In his dealings, again, with the Israelites in Egypt, when he returned after a long interval to visit them,—it chiefly concerned them to know him as the ever-living and unchanging God of Providence. The dispensation which he originates as the Almighty God, he sustains and carries forward as the unchangeable Jehovah. And hence, accordingly, the Lord Jesus would have revealed himself to the devout Jews of his time as bearing this very character, and this very name; with special reference to their great father Abraham, and his immortal hope: "He desired to see my day, and he saw it and was glad. For before Abraham was, I AM" (John viii. 58).

In this chapter, the state of things on the earth at its first creation is briefly described. "These are the generations,"—or, as we would say, the following is the account of the original condition,—“of the heavens and of the earth when

they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens " (ver. 4). Such is the usual beginning of a new section in the narrative,—the title or heading of a new chapter. Whenever the inspired compiler or historian opens a fresh fountain in the stream of his annals, he employs the formula of genealogical succession or derivation: "These are the generations."

In the present instance, this formula introduces a description of the world, both natural and moral, as it stood completely adjusted, on the day of the finished creation.

I. The economy of the kingdom of inanimate nature, or of the vegetable world, was fitted at once to maintain the sovereignty of God, and to provide for the welfare of man, viewing man as a compound being, having both body and soul. "The LORD God made every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground. But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (ver. 5-7).

Three things, it is here implied, are ordinarily necessary to the growth of plants and herbs:—soil, climate, and culture. The vital energy of the earth itself, in which all various seeds are lodged, is the first element (ver. 5). The influence of rain and dew from heaven comes next (ver. 6). And lastly, there must be superadded the labour of the hand of man (ver. 7 compared with ver. 5).

This is the law of nature, or rather of nature's God. Originally, only the first of these powers could be in action; and, therefore, it is probable that, at the first, God created the plants and herbs, or caused them to spring up, in full maturity, so as to fit the new, or renewed, earth for the immediate use of the animals, and also to prepare its soil for the subsequent

operation of heaven's genial moisture, and man's faithful husbandry. Afterwards, the mist or vapour from the earth supplied the watery sky. And finally, the forming hand and inspiring Spirit of God brought forth man,—a corporeal and spiritual being,—having bodily powers and mental intelligence,—having life, both animal and rational. He was thus fitted to till the ground; and the employment was fitted for him. The energies of his bodily frame were exercised by labour; while his spirit was exercised by the intelligence and the faith which the particular kind of labour assigned to him required. He was placed in his true position. He was conscious at once of mastery over the earth which he was to till—and of dependence on the heaven from whence he was to expect the influence that alone could bless his toil. He had to work and to wait. It was a wholesome discipline; it was a becoming attitude then. It is so still. Our business now is to realise that very position in the kingdom of grace, which man at first held in the kingdom of nature. It is the position of working and waiting. "Be patient, therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient. Stablish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" (James v. 7).

II. The moral world also,—the spiritual kingdom, was rightly adjusted. 1. Man, as a sentient being, was placed in an earthly paradise (ver. 8-15). 2. As a rational and religious being, he was subjected to a divine law (ver. 16, 17). 3. As a social, or companionable being, he was furnished with human fellowship (ver. 18-25).

1. In the first place, provision was made for his wellbeing, as a sentient creature. He was placed in the garden of Eden; and Eden was well stocked with all trees of beauty and of usefulness, and well watered with rivers,—rich in golden sands, and in most costly precious stones. "And a river went out

of Eden to water the garden ; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison : that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold ; and the gold of that land is good : there is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon : the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel : that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates " (ver. 10-14).

Many have laboured to ascertain the site of Eden ; and so various and doubtful have been the opinions formed, that some have regarded the countries and rivers here named as no longer existing ; the deluge, as is supposed, having swept away all the ancient landmarks. But although several of the marks given by the sacred historian may have been obliterated and lost, through convulsions of nature and the hand of man, his description is so circumstantial that it must be intended to point out, even since the flood, the place where Eden was. It is probable that they who lived before us, and for whom Moses wrote, might recognise the spot ; and it is not impossible, that they who come after us may be able to recognise it better than we can do now. It may have been the design of the Holy Ghost to employ his servant Moses,—writing by Divine inspiration, not for himself but for the faithful in after-ages,—to leave on record a map by which, when the proper time comes, the exact locality of paradise may be again identified.

Meanwhile, in a vague and general way, the most learned and laborious researches seem to fix down the site of Eden to some part of the region which the Euphrates and its kindred streams water, as they fall into the Persian Gulf (Gen. xxv. 18 ; Dan. x. 4). The Ethiopia, or Cush, spoken of in the thirteenth verse, is not the region in Africa known under that name, but a territory in Asia, embracing the country of the Midianites and part of Arabia (Numb. xii. 1 ; Exod. ii. 21). Hence it is

not impossible, nor by any means unlikely, that in the latter days the place where Eden was,—bordering on the limits of the promised land as the original grant to Abraham extended it eastward (Gen. xv.),—may be destined yet to come again into note, as sharing the final fortunes of that land, whatever these may be (Ps. lxxii. 8). And for this end, perhaps, it has pleased God to give this geography of it beforehand, by which it may be known when the history of this earth is to be wound up.

In this garden, then, man was placed, not for idleness; his animal and sentient constitution does not fit him for being happy in idleness; but for an easy charge and for pleasant labour; to dress and keep a garden, spontaneously fruitful in trees pleasant to the sight, and good for food;—"And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (ver. 15). Thus, in the lowest view of his nature, as an animal being or "living soul," man was so situated, that his tastes and talents,—his powers and susceptibilities,—were exercised and satisfied to the very utmost measure of perfection in the creature.

2. In respect also, secondly, of the highest as well as the lowest part of his frame, man found in paradise his right place,—the place of free and accountable subjection to his Maker. He was made to feel his dependence, and to recognise his responsibility. He was under law. "And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (ver. 9, 16, 17).

There was a covenant; and there were the sacraments of a covenant,—the signs and seals of it. These were two; the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Every covenant between God and man has two parts—a promise, and a requirement or condition. And hence every covenant may have two sacraments,—the one, chiefly a sign and seal of the thing promised ; the other, chiefly a sign and seal of the thing required. In that first transaction, the tree of life was the sacrament, or the sign and seal, of the thing promised and guaranteed by God to man in paradise,—which was life. The other tree was the sacrament, or the sign and seal, of the thing required,—which was perfect obedience, to be tested and proved by abstinence from a single specified act of disobedience.

Thus, also, in regard to the new covenant,—the covenant of grace and salvation made with Christ, and with his people in him,—there are two parts, a promise and a requirement. The promise is the restoration and support of life ; and the requirement is union with Christ by faith, or the personal application and appropriation of the righteousness wrought out, and the redemption purchased, by him. There are, accordingly, two sacraments, alike under the Levitical and under the Christian form of that covenant. The sacrament of the Passover, or of the Lord's Supper, is mainly the sign and seal of the thing promised,—a new life, and the sustaining of it, by feeding upon the Lamb that was slain to procure it. The sacrament of Circumcision, or of Baptism, on the other hand, is the sign and seal of the thing required,—the cutting off of the corruption, or the washing away of the guilt of the flesh. This is really effected through faith in him who has taken away sin by the sacrifice of himself. With him, in his death and in his rising again, the believer is now identified. And of this identification, Circumcision or Baptism is the symbolic pledge.

According to this analogy, man had in paradise an outward and sensible pledge and token, both of the blessing promised, and of the terms on which it was promised.

The tree of life evidently typified and represented that eternal life which was the portion of man at first, and which

has become in Christ Jesus his portion again. It is found, accordingly, both in the paradise which was lost, and in the paradise which is regained. For "saith the Spirit to the churches, To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the garden" (Rev. ii. 7). The garden becomes at last a city, for the multitude of the redeemed to dwell in ; and "in the midst of the street of it is the tree of life," and "blessed are they who have right to it" (Rev. xxii. 2, 14). By the use of this tree of life in paradise, man was reminded continually of his dependence. He had no life in himself. He received life at every instant anew from him in whom alone is life. And of this continual reception of life, his continual participation of the tree of life was a standing symbol.

Again, by the other sacramental tree, man is reminded of what is his part in the covenant, or of the terms on which he holds the favour of his God which is his life. The fatal tree is to him, even before his fall, in a certain sense the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is a standing memorial of the reality of the distinction. It suggests the possibility of evil,—of disobedience,—which otherwise, in the absence of all lust, might not occur. And so it is a test and token of his submission to his Maker's will. Hence the fitness of this expedient, as a trial of man's obedience. If he was to be tried at all, it could scarcely, in paradise, be otherwise than by means of a positive precept. And the more insignificant the matter of that precept was, the better was it fitted for being a trial ;—the less was the temptation beforehand ; and the greater, consequently, the sin. Such a tree, then, might well serve the purpose intended. It might seal and ratify man's compliance with the will of God, and his enjoyment of the life of God. Or, on the other hand, it might occasion his sin and his death.*

* See Lectures (the Cunningham Lectures) on the Fatherhood of God ; appendix iv.

Thus man, in paradise, could not live without God. He could not but recognise God as placing him in the garden, giving him work to do, and all the trees of the garden to enjoy. He could not fail to recognise God also, as dispensing life to him continually and requiring from him continually a perfect obedience. Such is the true original position of man in respect of his Maker ; a position of grateful and cheerful dependence. In this position he has the fullest scope for delighting in God, admiring his works, enjoying his gifts, and partaking of his life. And yet he can never fail to recognise, in its utmost extent, the sovereignty of God ; having the sign of the Divine authority and his own subjection ever in his eye and within his grasp.

It was a high position. But he who is least in the kingdom of God, is in a higher and better. The believer in Jesus has the sign and seal, not of his own fallible obedience, but of the perfect and perfected obedience of the Righteous One ;—which is a surer title, and can never fail. And he is nourished for immortality, not by the tree of life springing from earth, but by the bread of life that came down from heaven.

3. Lastly, in the third place, man in paradise was a social, as well as a sentient and religious being : and in respect of this part also of his nature, God provided for him. Among the lower animals, man could claim subjects, to whom, in token of his authority, he gave names (ver. 19, 20). But he could recognise no fellow ; “there was not found an help meet for him” (ver. 20). He needed an equal. And one was found for him ;—“The Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone ; I will make him an help meet for him” (ver. 18) ; not a servant, not an inferior, but a companion—another self—whom he must love and cherish as his own body (Eph. v. 28). Out of his very ribs, accordingly, a spouse was formed for him ; and Adam welcomed her as part and parcel of himself ;—“This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh : she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man ”

(ver. 23). Hence arose an intercourse, pure and blessed, without sin and without shame (ver. 24, 25). Blameless and fearless, the two walked together in the sight of him who made them for one another, and made both of them for himself.

Such were the first parents of our race, in their state of probation; happy in their outward circumstances—in their relation to God—and in their union with one another. Thus, in the most favourable circumstances, the experiment was tried, of the ability of man, in his best estate, to live, and to retain life, on the terms of a covenant of works. Even in his state of innocency, the law could not save him, in that “it was weak through the flesh,”—through his liability to sin (Rom. viii. 3). And if it would not do for man then, how much less will it do for us now? How true must it be, that a mere legal enactment—the mere peremptory enforcement of a law—instead of insuring compliance, will provoke and stimulate opposition in our nature? Let us thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord, that in him in whom there is to us now no condemnation, we are placed at once, if we believe, on a better footing, in this respect, than Adam himself ever held. The second Adam, substituting his own righteousness for ours,—and the free grace of God instead of any prescribed or stipulated condition on our part,—enables us in a new spirit and with a new heart, upright and sincere, to serve God, without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

It is true that, although thus far delivered,—set free from the sentence of condemnation and blessed with the first fruits of the Spirit,—we are constrained to sympathise with the groans of creation, which has been made subject to vanity, for man’s sake. The painful sweat of the brow and the sad cry of famine among the weary children of labour,—hard, precarious, ill-requited labour,—too frequently present a far different picture from the scene of peace and plenty which the

young and fresh world displayed ; and even at the best, they who are most at ease have weariness of spirit as their portion here below. Where are the rich plains and golden streams of paradise ? Where its simple innocence, and the tree in whose fruit was life ever fresh and new ? Would the beasts and the fowls now flock at man's call around him, to rejoice in his presence and await his pleasure ? The few who can now be brought to dwell at home with him, serve but to show how happy this intercourse might have been ; and even these few fare but miserably at his hands ; while the greater number fly at his approach, or scowl in defiance against him. And how is the social economy deranged and out of joint ! The very love of husband and wife itself is dishonoured. Even into holy marriage, and its kindred ties of family and of brotherhood, the taint or suspicion of sin's poison is insinuated. Every where corruption is felt, or feared ; and all have learned to be ashamed.

But it shall not be always thus. A new world is to arise. "The earth shall yield her increase," and "God's blessing" shall be added, when "he shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon earth" (Ps. lxxvii. 4, 6). The creatures shall again rejoice under man's dominion, when he who was "made a little lower than the angels, and then crowned with glory and honour," receives "praise out of the mouth of babes and sucklings,"—the little children of whom his kingdom is composed,—and "still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps. viii ; Heb. ii.) And then also, they who are accounted worthy to receive that world, and the resurrection from the dead, shall neither marry nor be given in marriage, neither shall they any more be liable to death, for they shall be as the angels of God (Luke xx. 35, 36).

Then shall be realised what some impious dreamers would affect to aim at now ; and plenty, peace, and purity shall reign. Then may those laws and institutions be safely dispensed with or disparaged, which at present restrain the law-

less passions that otherwise would make this earth a hell. But wo to all who would prematurely touch these safeguards, whether with the rude hand of violence, or the more refined and subtle influence of a factitious sanctity and a spurious kind of purity,—such as, at the best, is but an unequal warfare with the impure. Wo to those who remove landmarks, or encourage insubordination, or despise holy marriage, whether for the licence of unbridled lust, or in vain idolatry of the virgin state.

The present ordinance of God on this earth enjoins labour, with its attendant right of property,—dominion, with its distinction and gradation of orders,—and matrimony, with its train of blessed charities. These are the very bulwarks of the social fabric. And however much all of them are now affected by the character of vanity to which the whole creation is subjected, they are the only alleviations of its groans. They are the remnants of a better order of things; and, through the grace and blessed hope of the Gospel, they become the pledges to the redeemed, of a happier industry, a more peaceful reign, and a purer fellowship, when Christ shall have subdued all things to himself, and the universal song shall be : “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth !” (Ps. viii.).

IV.

DEVOTIONAL AND PROPHETIC
VIEW OF THE CREATION, BEING AN APPENDIX TO
THE TWO PRECEDING PAPERS.

PSALM CIV.

THIS psalm is, as I understand it, a meditation on the work of creation, and on the earth as it came from its Maker's hands, and as it may once again appear, when he renews its face. It may be used without violence as a devotional accompaniment to the historical record in the beginning of Genesis. It may fill our hearts and mouths with praise, as we dwell on the wondrous details of that first manifestation of the glory of God; while it carries forward our glowing hopes to still more illustrious manifestations of the same glory yet to come.

When and by whom it was composed, is altogether uncertain. Some have argued, from the entire absence of any allusion to Jewish rites, or to events in Jewish history, that it must be a patriarchal song of praise, indited before Israel came out of Egypt, and received the law in the wilderness. Others again—so contradictory and conjectural is the judgment of interpreters,—and these, too, men of unrivalled learning and sagacity, have recognised in this psalm, and particularly in its opening description, so unequivocal a series of allusions to the Tabernacle service, the priestly costume, and the Shechinah glory in the holy place, as to fix its date, beyond question, under the dispensation of Sinai.

The explanation, probably, is, that God's discovery of himself in the redemption from Egypt, and his discovery of himself in the creation of the world, are not so different as might be supposed. He who discovers himself in both instances is the same,—the

Eternal Word,—the Son,—whose dwelling is in the bosom of the Father, and whose office it is to declare the Father (John i. 18). And his manner of discovering himself, and declaring the Father, is not apt to change. When he comes forth from the Father, on whatever occasion, and for whatever work, he appears as “the brightness of the Father’s glory.” Hence, we may expect a close analogy,—or rather an exact identity,—among all the manifestations of the Godhead, in the person of the only begotten of the Father. First of all, at the creation of the world ; next, at the gate of paradise, after the fall ; afterwards, in fellowship with Abraham and the patriarchs ; and then again, and anew, in the Jewish economy and worship ;—subsequently, also, in the days of his flesh, when, even as he dwelt in a lowly tabernacle of humanity among men, his glory was beheld on the Mount of Transfiguration ;—then, in his ascension to heaven, and his appearances to the martyr Stephen and the persecuting Saul ;—once more, in his second advent, when he is to come in his own glory, and the glory of his Father, and of the holy angels ;—and, finally, in his eternal sojourn on earth, when the tabernacle of God is to be with man, and the Lord is to be with his people for ever ;—on all these occasions it is the same blessed Jehovah who comes forth, and in the same state and style.

In the very first utterance of praise with which this psalm opens, the devout worshipper hails his triumphant King,—“Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord, my God, thou art very great ; thou art clothed with honour and majesty” (ver. 1). Have we not here the believer welcoming his expected Lord ? The loyal subject bursts forth into admiring strains of joy, as he beholds his Sovereign and Saviour, long hidden, but now at last revealed in his glory. Especially, if we connect this psalm with that which precedes it,—as the singular coincidence of the one in its close, and the other in its commencement, “Bless the Lord, O my soul,” would lead us to do,—we cannot fail to recognise the real scene of this magnificent ode as laid in the latter days upon the earth.

That psalm—the hundred and third—most pathetically describes the dispensation of grace under which we are now placed. In it the believer gratefully recounts all the Lord’s benefits of which he is already made a partaker—the pardon of sin—the healing of his

nature's disease—his redemption from wrath—his possession of the Lord's crowning favour and love—his contented satisfaction with the portion allotted to him—and the renewal of his youth day by day (Ps. ciii. 3-5). Further, he expresses his confidence in the Lord's providential government of the world (ver. 6-14). He appeals to the experience of God's rule over Israel (ver. 7); and he specially describes the nature of the Divine administration, and the principles which regulate the present dealings of God with the children of men;—these principles being substantially two,—that of long-suffering patience toward all (ver. 8, 9), and that of special and distinguishing grace towards his people (ver. 10). This grace, in its source and manner, is as far above their desert, or even their comprehension, as the heaven is above the earth (ver. 11). In its result or effect it fully and freely justifies the sinner,—making as complete a separation between him and his guilt, as there is between the rising and the setting sun (ver. 12). And moreover, in its continual exercise, it goes forth in movements of tenderest sympathy and concern, as the grace of one who is touched with the feeling of man's infirmity (ver. 13, 14). Such grace, thus tender and sympathising, is peculiarly needed; since, even in his best estate, man is altogether vanity (ver. 15, 16). Even the believer, calling upon his soul to bless the Lord for the inestimable present benefits of grace and salvation, groans under his subjection to vanity and death (Rom. viii. 23). But he comforts himself; first, with the general assurance, that the Lord is faithful and true,—that he is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever (ver. 17, 18); and then, more particularly, with the anticipation of the Lord's future and glorious kingdom (ver. 19).

Here is the salvation by hope, of which Paul speaks (Rom. viii. 24). The believer, out of the very depths of his depression,—groaning within himself by reason of vanity,—sees the coming glory. "The Lord hath prepared his throne in the heavens." Shall we say that, being already prepared in the heavens, that throne is soon to be revealed as coming down to this earth? It is the throne of God and of the Lamb. For it is of the Lamb that it is said, that his "kingdom ruleth over all" (ver. 19; see also Rev. xvii. 14, and xxii. 3).

And what means the sudden and abrupt strain of triumph with

which the psalm concludes? (ver. 20-22). Why are the angels summoned—the hosts of the Lord—and his ministers that do his pleasure? What is this solemn and sublime occasion, on which all his works, in all places of his dominion, are so loudly, and as it were, impatiently called to bless him? Whence this hallelujah, this emphatic benediction of thine, O soul! but now lost in the complaint that we are all dust?—"Bless the Lord, O my soul!" What is the event on account of which thou hast summoned the whole creation of God to join with thee, in so exultingly praising and blessing the Lord?

Shall we say that it is the renewed earth—the new heavens and the new earth—the earth fresh once more from the Creator's hand;—as on the day when first the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted aloud for joy, "and the Lord saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good?"

Let the hundred and fourth psalm be the reply. Observe how, in its opening doxology, it takes up the dying strain of its predecessor,—seizes the very note which closed the preceding song,—and ere its echo has melted away in silence, strikes, on the same key, a new and kindred anthem of praise! "Bless the Lord, O my soul!"—so ends the one psalm. Yes,—“Bless the Lord, O my soul!”—so begins the other. It is plainly a continuation,—a renewal,—a resuming of the same theme. It is the believer welcoming his Lord; the rapt and meditative saint, in prophetic imagination, as if already risen, meeting the returning Saviour. And with what wonder and adoring rapture is he filled! "O Lord, my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty!" He sees the Lord as he is. He beholds the King in his glory. "O Lord, how great art thou!"

Such being the opening of this psalm, its whole scheme and structure is in accordance with its commencement. It is a manifestation of the glory of God in creation;—first, in that original creation of this earth for which the Eternal Word came forth from the bosom of the Father;—and subsequently again, in that new creation with a view to which we look for his coming forth yet once more. Hence the description turns upon that first work of creating

power, as the type and shadow of the other. It represents the earth, hitherto without form, void of being, and shrouded in thick darkness,—changed into the garden of the Lord, by the introduction successively of light and order, as subservient to life.

I. LIGHT breaks in on the thick gloom of the chaotic waters. And here, as in Genesis, it is the glorious Creator himself who is the LIGHT. “Thou coverest thyself with light as with a garment” (ver. 2). “God said,”—his WORD went forth ;—not a dead utterance, but his WORD ;—and in the WORD “was life, and the life was the light of men.” Hence, when “God said, let there be light,”—when his living Word, whose life is light, went forth,—“there was light.”

It is, therefore, at the first, the Light of life that dispels the darkness,—consisting, not in rays emanating from material luminaries, which as yet pierced not the dim vapour that enveloped the earth,—but in the presence of the Creator himself. It is such light as is to shine in that day of which Isaiah speaks, when he describes the earth reeling to and fro like a drunkard, and being removed like a cottage, and the Lord punishing the host of the high ones,—and thereafter adds :—“The moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, because the Lord of Hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously” (Isa. xxiv. 23 ; see also Isa. xvi. 19 ; and Rev. xxi. 23). Thus, when the Word goes forth in creation, there is light ;—“Thou coverest thyself with light as with a garment.”

II. By the same direct and immediate agency of the creating Word, ORDER, as well as LIGHT, is introduced. He is himself the ORDER, as he is the LIGHT, of the world. His very presence implies a right arrangement and adjustment of the elements of nature, hitherto blended and confounded in one watery mass of vapour.

1. This watery chaos must be reduced to order. There must be a separation between the upper material heaven and this lower earth ; and on the earth itself, between the sea and the dry land. “The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s, but the earth hath he given to the children of men” (Ps. cxv. 16). Hence, at his presence, the heavens must be set in order, as it were, for himself, and the earth for the habitation of man.

The Lord appears in royal state, with a retinue of attendant angels and ministering spirits innumerable ; and he and his train must have fit accommodation. A palace, a temple, or at least a tabernacle, must be prepared for him. For this end, the azure sky, with its many-coloured drapery of clouds, is formed above the firmament, hanging upon the expansive air, by which the vapours above are divided from the denser waters below. The "heavens,"—the visible arching canopy over our heads,—God "stretcheth out like a curtain,"—making, as it were, his dwelling there ; as afterwards he dwelt in the bright pillar of cloud, and in the curtained tent in the wilderness (ver. 2). He has his "chambers" there, with their "beams laid in the waters,"—the waters above the firmament,—the cloudy vapours which seem to hide his glory, as in the recess of the holy place, within the veil (ver. 3). Nor does he want the means and instruments of motion when he would arise, he and the ark of his strength. He has "a chariot" in the drifting and swift-driving "clouds ;" and the fleet "winds" are his winged coursers, on which he "walketh" and flieth all abroad (ver. 3). His attendants also are provided for and accommodated in his train. "His angels" are in the "spirits," or breezes as they blow. "His ministering servants" are in the lightning's winged "fire" (ver. 4).

Thus the Lord, covering himself with light as with a garment, uses the upper firmament or heaven, with all its constituent parts, as his own. He retains it in his own hands, and all its elements he reserves under his own immediate control : "fire and hail, snow and vapour, stormy wind, fulfilling his word" (Ps. cxlviii. 8). These are not given to man to be controlled or managed by him : the Lord and his angels are ever in the midst of them.

Hence the solemn awe with which a devout spirit may well contemplate the sublime expanse above. He need not be ashamed to tremble when the fierce war of the elemental storm is raging. He sees and feels a present God, and he may think of the day when, in some way even such as this, the Lord shall come with innumerable spirits, to judge, to consume, and yet again to renew the earth.

The heaven above being thus prepared as God's throne, the earth is ordered as his footstool : its "foundations" are "laid, that it should not be removed for ever" (ver. 5). And it is fashioned as

a dwelling-place for his creatures (ver. 6-13). The waters under the heaven are gathered into one place, and the dry land appears. "The deep," which covered "the earth as a garment," and whose "waters stood above the mountains," hastens, at God's "voice of thunder," to its appointed "place" (ver. 6, 7). Then is seen the graceful alternation of hill and dale,—the lofty mountain and the deep-drawn secluded valley (ver. 8, *marginal reading*); and the sea occupies its proper bed, its "bounded" channels, leaving the earth free from its "returning" tide (ver. 9).

This also is the Lord's doing. It is he alone who can limit ocean's wide flow, and keep its proud waves in check. In vain shall the conqueror of an earthly kingdom, at the bidding of his crowd of flatterers, presume to arrest its swelling flood. It is the arm of God alone that controls it. And to prove that it is so,—to mock the scoffers who reckon on the stability of nature, and say all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation,—to show that by his word alone the earth is kept standing out of the water and in the water,—the world is suddenly, by the Lord's visitation for sin, overflowed with water until it perishes; as, for the same cause, it is once again to be destroyed by the fire,—unto which, by the same word, it is kept in store and reserved (2 Pet. iii. 7).

But not only is the dry land separated from the waters of the sea,—these waters are now themselves made subservient to its further preparation for the habitation of life. Not now rushing over it in an overflowing flood, but distilling gently in "springs," and rivulets, and streams, amidst the "valleys and hills" (ver. 10), and descending softly, in refreshing dews and fertilising showers, from the vapoury "chambers" of the heavens (ver. 13); they fit the earth for the abode of the "beasts of the field, and the wild asses" of the desert, and the winged songsters that make all the air melodious (ver. 11, 12); so that being now ready to be given to man, "the earth is satisfied with the fruit of the Lord's works" (ver. 13). Thus the first stage in the introduction of order is completed.

2. The dry land, however, though now separated from the waters which once overflowed it, and refreshed by the streams amid the hills and the rain from heaven, needs yet a further process of arrangement. Vegetation must be imparted to it (Gen. i. 11, 12).

Accordingly, "grass and herb, for food" (ver. 14)—"wine, oil, and bread" (ver. 15)—"trees of the Lord, full of sap,"—"cedars of Lebanon, where the birds may nestle,"—"fir-trees for the stork;"—and even in the "high hills" and the bare and rugged "rocks," some coarse and scanty produce which may suffice for the adventurous "goat" and the timid "cony;"—all the seeds of vegetable nature, whether in the luxuriance of Carmel's plain and Lebanon's forest, or in the desolation of the rugged and dreary wilderness,—all are stored in the bounteous bosom of mother earth, and all for her children's nourishment. Such is the second part of this process of adjustment.

3. One other arrangement remains to be made. The light which burst all abroad, wide-spread and unconfined, on the first coming forth of the living and creating WORD,—while, as yet, no rays from any luminary in the upper sphere could penetrate the darkness of the chaotic waters,—is now stored up in the heavenly bodies, and ordinarily the earth is to be indebted to them for this blessing (Gen. i. 14-18). This method of illumination is turned to account for the distinction of seasons on the earth,—and especially, for perpetuating the grateful vicissitude of day and night, already instituted by God himself, that the period of toil might sweetly alternate with the welcome season of balmy sleep (ver. 19-23). And here, by a marvellous economy, provision would seem to be made, even for the violence with which, by reason of sin, earth for a time is filled. For while the "roaring" and ravenous "beasts" find night their congenial time for roaming, and shun the cheerful light of the sun;—"man," on the contrary, "goeth forth unto his work, and to his labour, until the evening."

Thus the entire ordering of the heavens and the earth is finished; and the devout soul comes to a solemn pause of wonder, admiration, gratitude, and joy,—“O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches” (ver. 24). The earth thus illuminated and arranged, having received light and order, is full of God's riches,—richly furnished for the dwelling-place of man and of beast. Nay, the very sea itself, although it might seem to have been cast off by the emerging earth as but a worn-out covering and burdensome encumbrance, which had

been serviceable in the dark and cold night of chaos, but of which, as the cheering beams of heavenly light broke in, it was glad to get rid—even “this great and wide sea,” so far from being thrown aside, at least in the meanwhile,—for is there not a time coming when “there shall be no more sea?” (Rev. xxi. 1)—is found to teem with manifold wonders of creating wisdom. “The earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea.” Countless myriads of living creatures, forming part of man’s system or economy, harbour in its depths, and swarm amid its shallows (ver. 25). Its surface is subservient to the use of man, as it wafts on its wide bosom the busy agents of commerce, the eager votaries of science, discovery and adventure, the ministers of philanthropy, the messengers of salvation, heralds to all nations of the tidings of great joy;—thus uniting distant lands in one holy brotherhood, and equalising God’s benefits over all the earth—“There go the ships” (ver. 26). While in its vast unfathomed caves, far out of the reach of man, whom he might destroy, sports that monster, whatever it may be, which God hath formed, and God alone can control—meet type of the great enemy whom God at last is so signally and terribly to punish—“There is that leviathan whom thou hast made to play therein” (ver. 26. See Job xli. and Isaiah xxvii. 1).

III. The light and the order introduced into the earth are subservient to the life with which it is to be stored. The fishes, accordingly, the fowls, and the beasts of the field,—all the animals with which man is conversant, and over which he has dominion,—with MAN himself, laborious man, the lord of all, have passed in review before the devout soul in this psalm. The whole glorious work of creation is at an end.

The Sabbatic rest of God succeeds (ver. 27, 28). He rests from creating; he rests that he may bless the creatures which he hath made. “These all,” the creatures made by thee, now “wait upon thee.” They are still dependent upon thee. The Creator has not withdrawn from the world which he hath formed into the mysterious seclusion of absolute repose, leaving it as a machine to go on of itself. “My Father,” says the blessed Jesus, “worketh hitherto,” even during his Sabbath of rest, “and I work.” There is rest, inasmuch

as he ceases from creating. There is continual work still, inasmuch as he never ceases to watch over, and preserve, and bless his creatures. His Sabbath, so far from precluding, as the Jews imagined, even the doing of good, may consist in that very labour. The Lord rejoices in the rest of a holy complacency over the works of his hands. But he continually works in caring for their well-being. Such also,—analogous and corresponding to the Sabbath of the Creator,—is the Sabbath of the creature. It consists in fellowship with the rest of holy complacency into which the Creator entered ; and in caring, as he does, and working, if need be, for the saving of life, and the doing of good (Mark iii. 4 ; John v. 17).

And now, what a scene is here presented to the eye of the worshipper in this psalm ! God is present before him in his glory, in the glory in which he came forth to this world, when light began to be—the glory in which he reposed, when he saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. What a bright and glowing picture,—God dwelling with his creatures,—all of them waiting upon him, “gathering” his manifold “gifts,” and “filled with the good” that flows from his “open hand !” (ver. 27, 28).

But, alas, a change comes over the landscape. There is a blight in this seemingly serene atmosphere—a curse on this smiling earth. “The creation is made subject to vanity. It groaneth and travaileth together in pain.” There is sin, and death by sin, and a character of weary and bitter vanity is stamped on all things here below (ver. 29. See Rom. viii. 20).

Thus, too often, as one may have felt it, when the eye is filled with the glory of some gorgeous scene of autumnal riches, spread out in the plain beneath our feet ; and the ear is charmed with the exuberant melody of a thousand blended voices in the surrounding groves, and in the sky, high over head ; when all the air, on every side, breathes a balmy peace, and no sights anywhere appear save only sights of rural innocence and beauty, of quiet life and love ; when the soul is wrapt in a silent ecstasy of unspeakable joy—ah, may not the memory suddenly come over us of some recent and kindred deathbed, or some desolate abode of famine, or some careworn face of woe ! How, in a moment, is the spell

broken—the charm dissolved—the glory and the loveliness all melted away ! Yes, surely the earth is cursed for man's sake (Gen. iii. 18) ; the whole creation is made subject to vanity. And “ as for man, his days are as grass : as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more ” (Ps. ciii. 15, 16). Sin has wrought sad havoc and ruin. It has caused the Lord “ to hide his face ; ” and trouble and decay, vanity and vexation of spirit, change and death and the dreary grave, await all the dwellers on the earth. “ Even they who have received the first fruits of the Spirit do still groan within themselves ” (Rom. viii. 23).

But they “ wait for the manifestation of the sons of God ” (Rom. viii. 19). They “ wait for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body ” (Rom. viii. 23). And the subjection of the creature to vanity, is “ in hope ” (Rom. viii. 18, 19) ; “ because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.”

At present the sons of God are hidden : they are his hidden ones. High as is their rank and marvellous the love of which they are the objects, sealed as they are with the Holy Spirit, the first-fruits of their inheritance, the world knoweth them not, even as it knew Him not (1 John iii. 1). “ Their life is now hid with Christ in God ; but when he who is their life shall appear, they also shall appear with him in glory ” (Col. iii. 4). It is for this manifestation, this public appearance, this open acknowledgment of the sons of God, that the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth ; and into their glorious liberty the creature itself also shall be delivered.

Is not this that new creation of this lower world, which is to fit it for being the home of the Lord's redeemed ? The present groans of creation are the pangs of its coming regeneration. It is to come forth again from the hand of the Great Creator, fashioned gloriously anew ;—even as the sons of God, for whose manifestation it waiteth, and into whose liberty it is to be delivered, are to have “ their vile bodies fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself ” (Phil. iii. 21). In the words of the psalm (ver. 30), “ He sendeth forth his Spirit,”—the Spirit which moved on the waters of old,—and there

is again a new "creation." He "reneweth the face of the earth." Once more it is such as he can pronounce to be very good ; for it is the new earth "wherein dwelleth righteousness." "The glory of the Lord shall endure for ever ; the Lord shall rejoice in his works" (ver. 31).

Such is the certainty of this renewal of the earth. It is bound up with the Lord's glory enduring for ever, and with his rejoicing in his works. As surely as his glory must endure for ever, and he must rejoice in his works, so surely must he send forth his Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

Nor is the manner of this renewal concealed from us. The earth is shaken, the hills are set on fire, at the sight and touch of the Lord coming in judgment (ver. 32). There is a repetition of the scene with which the original creation opened ; but with an incalculable increase of glory, the glory of redeeming grace and love being super-added to the glory of creating power. "The Son of man cometh in the clouds,"—"making the clouds his chariot,"—"in his own glory," the glory that is peculiar to him, as the only begotten of the Father, God manifest in the flesh, the Lamb slain for his people, the King and Head of his redeemed : in this glory, which is his own, he cometh, as well as "in the glory of his Father, and of the holy angels" (Luke ix. 26). At his appearance, "the earth trembleth, and the mountains smoke." There is a dissolution of the elements of nature. The great globe itself is convulsed and burnt up with fire. But the issue is glorious and blessed. It is such as to call forth a new and more rapturous song of praise (ver. 33, 34) ; as the believing soul, rejoicing in the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the face of the earth, finds at last an abode of purity and peace, where before it experienced so much of the weariness and vanity of the flesh, and groaned, being burdened. "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live : I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. My meditation of him shall be sweet : I will be glad in the Lord." Then the meek shall inherit the earth (Ps. xxxvii. 9, 11), when "sinners are consumed out of it, and the wicked are in it no more" (ver. 35). Now, while it is subject to vanity and filled with violence, the meek have often no refuge from their groanings but the grave, where "the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are

at rest." But it shall not be always thus. This earth is too precious in God's sight to be wholly given over as reprobate. It is precious as the work of his hands, in which at first he rejoiced. And it is precious also as the scene of his Son's obedience, sufferings, and death, in which he delighteth still more. There is a place prepared for the devil and his angels, into which the ungodly shall be cast. But "the earth is the Lord's," and "the King of glory shall at last enter in" to possess it (Ps. xxiv.).

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. xxiv. 1). He hath "given it" indeed "to the sons of men" (Ps. cxv. 16), and grievously have they abused the gift. But it is the Lord's still. He made it. He "founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods" (Ps. xxiv. 2). It is his, and he means to claim it as his. It sympathised in darkness with the agony of his cross; and by the earthquake and the opening of the graves, acknowledged his victory. Resuming it therefore out of the hands of those who have destroyed it, redeeming it and purifying it anew, he will himself "establish the mountain of his house in the top of the mountains, and exalt it above the hills" (Isa. ii. 2). "His tabernacle is to be with men" (Rev. xxi. 3).

"Who," then, "shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? and who shall stand in his holy place?" (Ps. xxiv. 3). A pertinent and pointed question. It is the one question, above all others, which, in these circumstances, is worthy of an answer. And what can the answer be? If the earth is the Lord's, and if his hill and his holy place are to be there, who can enter in or abide but those that are his—that are his fully, honestly, unreservedly? Uprightness, sincerity, truth in the inward parts, is the test or qualification. There must be single-eyed honesty in dealing with men, and in seeking the face of the God of Jacob (Ps. xxiv. 4-6). He alone can enter in "whose heart is fixed, who desires one thing of the Lord and seeks after it," with singleness of eye and unity of aim, "even that he may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. xxvii. 4). This is he who, being justified freely by the grace of God, receiving a perfect righteousness and rejoicing in a perfect

reconciliation—moved by the Spirit to lay aside all guile, and to enter directly and immediately into the favour and the service of God,—walks as one whose heart is right with God, and consequently, as to man, is in its right place. He is an Israelite indeed. He is one of the “meek,” the “merciful,” the “pure in heart,” who are blessed, because they are to “inherit the earth, to obtain mercy, and to see God” (Matt. v. 5-8).

With such a train, the Lord is to claim the earth as his own. When all is ready, when the face of the earth is renewed, and sinners are consumed out of it, there is a shout heard as of a rushing multitude drawing near—the shout of those who have come with the Lord or met him in the air (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17). The earth is formally summoned to open “her gates, even her everlasting doors.” There is an illustrious conqueror waiting to be admitted. He enters with his company of risen and changed saints (1 Cor. xv. 51). He is “the King of Glory!”—He who spoils principalities and powers, who subdues all things to himself, who wrests from death his sting, and from the grave his victory. He takes possession accordingly, as the King of Glory, of his ransomed and recovered earth. And the humble believer, who has shared the bitterness of his cross, rejoices in his crown. Exulting in the regeneration of this earth, and its consecration anew as the Lord’s, he exclaims, in an ecstasy of uncontrollable joy, “Bless thou the Lord, O my soul! Praise ye the Lord” (Ps. civ. 35).

V.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION—
ITS SUBTLETY AS IMPEACHING THE GOODNESS,
JUSTICE, AND HOLINESS OF GOD.

GENESIS iii. 1-5.

But I fear lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.—2 CORINTHIANS xi. 3.

THE agent in the temptation is undoubtedly not a mere serpent, but an evil spirit under the form of a serpent. He possesses and abuses the powers of reason and speech. The serpent was probably by nature more subtle than any beast of the field; and on that account this form may have been selected by the tempter. But that there was here present one more subtle still, is plainly to be inferred, from the repeated allusions to this history in other parts of the Bible. Thus Job speaks of the "crooked serpent" being made by God's hand (chap. xxvi. 13). Isaiah foretells the punishment of "leviathan, the piercing serpent—even leviathan, that crooked serpent" (chap. xxvii. 1). And in the Revelation, we read of "the great dragon being cast out, that old serpent, called the devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world;" and again, of "the dragon, that old serpent which is the devil and Satan, being bound a thousand years" (Rev. xii. 9, and xx. 2). All these expressions plainly indicate, that the great spiritual adversary of our race;—the Devil, or the calumniator, traducer, and libeller; Satan or the enemy; takes one of his titles at

least from the sad transaction in which, under the form of a serpent, he had so memorable a share.

Various questions are here raised. Had the serpent originally the same reptile and grovelling form which he has now? Or is that form the just result and punishment of his instrumentality in this work of the Devil? How did he communicate with Eve, so as to suggest thoughts to her mind? Why does Moses give no direct notice of the real nature of this transaction, so as explicitly to reveal the actual character of the tempter?

The same remark applies here which I made in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. The written word was not the commencement of a revelation concerning God and the spiritual world. It was addressed to men who had already heard of these things. We should expect, therefore, that whatever information the Scriptures give on the great primary facts of religion,—such as the existence of God, and of spirits good and evil,—would be given rather indirectly, in the way of taking them for granted, than directly, in the way of positive announcement. That it is so, may be regarded as strong internal evidence of the divine authority of this book; while as to the doctrines themselves, it is the most satisfactory of all kinds of proof to find them thus all along, and all throughout, incidentally and undesignedly assumed; rather than formally, as if for the first time, revealed and taught.

In the present case, the historian relates the scene of the temptation just as it might pass before the senses; leaving us to gather from it, as if we had ourselves been eye-witnesses, its true nature, meaning, and consequences. That the transaction, however, was real, cannot be doubted by any who consider fairly what Christ says of the author of it,—“he was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth” (John viii. 44); and how Paul speaks of his victims, as “be-guiled by the serpent, through his subtlety” (2 Cor. xi. 3).

The art of this temptation is very much the same as that

which still prevails over men in whom there is "an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God" (Heb. iii. 12). It is by arguments of unbelief that the wily fiend solicits to sin.

I. Thus, first, he insinuates doubts regarding the equity and goodness of God:—"Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (ver. 1). Can it be? Has he really subjected you to so unreasonable a restraint? And the insinuation takes effect. Suspicion begins to rankle in the woman's breast. In her very manner of citing the terms of the covenant, she shows that she is dwelling more on the single restriction, than on all the munificence of the general grant. In the Lord's first announcement of it, the main stress is laid upon the grant. It is expressed with a studied prodigality of emphasis; "of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat." And the single limitation is but slightly, though solemnly, noted; "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it." The woman, however, drinking in the miserable poison of suspicion which the serpent has instilled, reverses this mode of speaking. How disparagingly does she notice the fulness and freeness of the gift;—"we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden!" That is all the acknowledgment she makes; and there is no cordiality in it. It is not "every tree," nor, "we may freely eat;" but, "we may eat of the fruit of the trees;"—as if the permission were grudgingly given;—and as if it were altogether a matter of course, and even less almost than her right. On the other hand, she dwells upon the prohibition, amplifying it and magnifying it as an intolerable hardship;—"but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it" (ii. 16, 17; iii. 2, 3).

Is not this the very spirit of Jonah, to whom it was nothing that Nineveh was given him as the reward of his

faithful preaching, if the gourd that refreshed him was removed? Is it not the temper of Haman, who, amid all the riches and splendour of court favour, cried out in bitterness of soul ;—" All this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate?"

II. Then, again, secondly, the tempter suggests doubts about the righteousness and truth of God as lawgiver and judge: "Ye shall not surely die." For this he finds the woman already more than half prepared. She very faintly and inadequately quotes the threat. She cites God as saying, not "in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die," but far more vaguely,—*"lest ye die"* (ii. 17 ; iii. 3). The same feeling of lust after the forbidden thing which made her exaggerate the severity of the prohibition, tempted her to extenuate the danger of transgression. Of this tendency, Satan knows how to avail himself. You are right in your half-formed surmises ; you may venture to take the risk ; there cannot really be much sin and danger in so harmless an act ; *"ye shall not surely die"* (ver. 4).

III. For, thirdly, he has a plausible reason to justify doubt and unbelief on that point. It cannot be that ye shall be so harshly dealt with, *"for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil"* (ver. 5).

There is great difficulty in conceiving the exact meaning of this assurance of the tempter, or the precise expectation or desire it was fitted to excite in the minds of our first parents. It may be observed, however, that the temptation throughout is well adapted to the two parts of the constitution of man, the will and the understanding. Satan proposes to the will more freedom, and to the understanding more knowledge, than God saw fit at first to grant. Has God imposed a restraint upon your will, or your freedom of choice?—that is his first suggestion. He cannot surely mean to make the increase of your knowledge fatal ;—that is his last.

But what increase of knowledge was the eating of the tree to give?

In reply, let us ask, what did our first parents previously know upon this subject of good and evil? In the first place, they knew good,—both the doing of good, and the receiving of good,—both obedience, and as the fruit of it, happiness. Again, secondly,—they knew the possibility of evil, by the prohibition of an act and the intimation of a penalty. But, thirdly,—evil itself they did not know, having no personal experience of either the doing or the suffering of it. This additional knowledge Satan promises; and he argues that it cannot possibly destroy them, since it is analogous and similar to that of the living God himself.

Nor is it Satan alone who represents the matter in this light, else it might be set down as one of his lies. The Lord God (ver. 22) speaks in the same way; “the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” Some, indeed, regard these words as spoken in severe irony or sarcasm; others consider them as stating, not what man actually became, but what he sought to become. In their plain meaning, however, they convey a far more serious and awful impression. Man, when he would be wise, intruded into the province of Deity. He aspired and attained to a kind of knowledge proper and safe to Deity alone; it could not be merely the knowledge of the distinction between good and evil. That knowledge is the property of all moral intelligence, and man possessed it from the first. The mere presence of the tree, apart from the eating of it, gave knowledge, to that extent, of good and evil. Man thus knew the nature of good, and the possibility of evil. He sought to know more,—to know evil, not as a possibility merely, but as a reality,—not negatively, but positively,—not by symbol, but in fact,—by personal acquaintance and experience, by free and voluntary choice.

But how, in respect of this knowledge, should he be as

God? The utmost caution is needed here, but a thought may be hazarded. The Deity, in respect of his omnipresence and omniscience, being present everywhere and knowing everything, is intimately and personally cognizant of evil. Wheresoever evil is, there God is. He knows the evil—knows it by real and actual presence in the evil—is acquainted with it, more truly than the very doer of it, or the sufferer of it. And it is the prerogative and perfection of God to be thus ever present where evil is, intimately, personally, intelligently present,—thus to know it, and yet to be holy and to be blessed; to know evil only to hate it. His uncreated infinite nature is not affected. He knows good and evil, and he lives evermore,—for he is the Holy One; of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. Man, a created and imperfect being, would believe that he, too, might safely and with impunity know evil, as the Creator must needs know it, by intimate personal acquaintance with it; that he might know evil without loving it, or at least without loving it too much; without loving it, in the end, more than the Creator himself, knowing it as he does, must be willing to allow as excusable, and perhaps inevitable. Here lies the subtlety of this argument,—“Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil,” as God does; for you will contrive to persuade yourselves that he knows good and evil, just as you will do. You will be as God,—by making him out to be such an one as yourselves. So Satan, himself better informed, persuades man to believe; that his holiness is as inviolable as his Maker’s, or, which is the same thing, that his Maker’s is as flexible as his; that the acquaintance with evil which uncreated perfection alone can stand, created imperfection may with impunity covet.

This, then, was the order of the temptation: first, the goodness of God must be disbelieved; secondly, his justice; and lastly, his holiness. It begins with a rebellion of the will, or the heart, against the moral attributes of God, as the

Governor of his creatures. It ends in blindness of the understanding, or the mind, as to his essential perfections as the infinite and eternal Creator. God ceases to be recognised as good, and just, and holy. Man, at the suggestion of Satan, would himself be as good, as just, as holy as God.

1. He sets up his own goodness against that of God. Instead, of feeling, as the psalmist did, when he said, "Thou art my Lord, my goodness extendeth not to thee" (Ps. xvi. 2), or as the Lord Jesus intimates that a creature should feel even if he had fulfilled all righteousness,—accounting himself "an unprofitable servant, who had done only that which was his duty to do" (Luke xvii. 10); instead of this,—instead of thus magnifying the goodness of the Lord,—man begins to presume upon his own. He suspects the Divine love; and so far from being willing to receive his Maker's bounty as a free and unmerited gift,—he claims it as a right, questions its liberality, and resents any restriction upon it as a wrong.

2. In justice, also, he would cope with the Almighty; he would be more righteous than God. He presumes to sit in judgment on the sentence which the Judge of all the earth denounces against transgression,—to arraign its equity, and dispute its truth; and, instead of standing in awe at the remembrance of what the Lord actually has said, in which case he would not have sinned, he reckons on what, as he thinks, ought to be the Lord's rule in dealing with him, and so practically condemns him that is most just (Job xxxiv. 17).

3. Finally, he will not see why God should be more perfect, more pure, and more holy than himself; why it should be more dangerous for him than for his Maker to touch what is unholy, to know what is evil; why he should not be as God; or, at all events, why God should not be as himself. For if he cannot rise to the holiness of God, he will bring down that holiness to his own level; confident that amid all his acquaintance with the mystery of iniquity, he may contrive to retain at least as much holiness as the Creator, know-

ing it himself, can fairly require or expect in his frail and imperfect creature.

What infatuation is here! What guilt triple-dyed! What ungrateful pride! What presumption and profanity!—pride, in man's overweening estimate of his own worth, presumption in his daring defiance of God's righteous judgments, profanity in measuring himself by Jehovah, or Jehovah by himself, as if the high and holy God were such an one as he!

Such is the art of the first temptation. Such also is the art of Satan's temptation still.

He begins by insinuating distrust of the Lord's liberal and bountiful loving kindness, so that the soul frets and chafes under the wholesome restraints of duty, and, insensible to the free grant of all other trees, takes it amiss that one should be withheld. The badge of dependence, however slight in itself, irritates and provokes. The feeling of obligation is irksome. Man does not like to be reminded of the Lord's right over his own gifts; he longs to have and use them on another footing, as belonging wholly to himself, without restriction, and without control.

In such a mood of mind, Satan easily persuades his victim to call in question the reasonableness and the reality of God's righteous sentence of wrath: "Ye shall not surely die,"—*ye* who are so high in God's favour and, on the whole, so exemplary; one offence, or two, will not be reckoned against *you*. "Ye shall not *surely* die;"—there may, there must, be some way of escape at last. "Ye shall not *surely die*:" at the worst, some milder visitation will be held sufficient; it may be necessary, for propriety's sake and for the vindication of God's consistency, that some slight token of his displeasure should be inflicted upon you; but it would be strange and harsh severity were his terrible threatening to be executed to the letter,—were you, for such an offence, to be utterly destroyed.

To this sophistry, Satan the rather wins consent, because

he has another lie still in reserve. The offence itself cannot be so very heinous in God's sight as might be inferred from his strong denunciation of it, nor can he be so very holy as not at least to have some indulgence for it. He who knows so much evil, and knows it so intimately, cannot be so utterly intolerant of it, as in no circumstances, and to no extent, ever to look on sin, or suffer iniquity to dwell before him. He must be somewhat more like his creatures than this would imply,—more nearly such an one as they are,—having more sympathy with them, or, at all events, more allowance to make for them. He knows evil, so as at least to seem to connive at it. And if they know it, so as to go a little further, and consent to it, the difference cannot be so very material as to require that they should be held altogether without excuse.

Such unutterable blasphemy men, half unconsciously, take in from the calumnies which Satan scruples not to vent against the most high God. Thus, with his lies, perverting the whole character of God,—divesting it of all that is attractive in goodness, terrible in righteousness, and venerable and awful in the majesty of holiness; and infusing into men's hearts, rankling suspicion, reckless defiance, and unshrinking familiarity with evil under the very eye of purity itself, as if that eye were nearly as indifferent to it as their own,—the devil leads captive those who listen to his wiles, promising them liberty: and persuading them that they may be, not merely subjects and children of God, but "as gods" themselves. And with these arts he continues to deceive them; and as the god of this world, he blinds their unbelieving minds, until the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, shines into their hearts (2 Cor. iv. 6).

Then, indeed, the truth flashes on the startled conscience. I see God now, not as Satan would represent him, but as he really is. I see him in Christ. Behold how he loves sinners, when he gives his only begotten Son to the death for them, and with him also freely gives them all things. See how he

judges and condemns the guilty, laying their guilt on the head of his Son, and exacting of him the penalty. Mark his infinite abhorrence of sin,—his absolute separation from all evil,—in the hiding of his face from his Holy One when he was made sin for us. Is this the God of whom I have entertained hard thoughts, as if he were austere and arbitrary,—with whose authority, at the same time, I have taken liberties, as if he never could execute his threatenings,—and to whom, above all, I have dared secretly to ascribe a degree of tolerance and complacency in looking upon evil, such as one like myself might feel? I awake as from a dream. How have I been deluded! I excused myself, by reflecting on him and on his law,—as if that law might turn out to be less pure, less strict, and less reasonable, than it professes to be. But “the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.” And what am I? A miserable sinner, without apology or excuse—I am undone. “Woe is unto me, for I have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.” “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death!”

“But I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord,” in whom, at last, taught by the Spirit, and misled no longer by the Devil, I see and feel the free love, the strict justice, and the perfect holiness of my God,—reconciling me to himself in righteousness, and causing me, as I enter into the mind of Christ on the cross, to know evil, as Christ then did; and with him, to die unto sin, that I may live unto God (Rom. vii. 12-25; Is. vi. 5-7).

This is “the simplicity that is in Christ,” of which the apostle speaks (2 Cor. xi. 3), when he expresses his fear, lest the minds even of those espoused to Christ should be corrupted from that simplicity, “as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety.” It is the simplicity of faith, as opposed to the subtlety of unbelief: the simplicity of a little child, as opposed to the subtlety of a proud understanding and a perverse heart. And unquestionably there is continual need of godly jealousy

for there is a strong bias or tendency, in the soul of every man, against simplicity, and in favour of subtlety. The Gospel itself is often felt to be too simple—too direct and straightforward ; it must be made more elaborate, more complicated and refined. The plan of reconciliation which God proposes is too plain, and comes too immediately to the point. Men would rather deal more circuitously with God, and have more ado made about their return to him, and a costlier and more cumbrous apparatus of means and conditions introduced. The simple truth and love of God, they pervert into a system of formal, or painful, self-righteousness. The doctrine of grace is no longer freely and unequivocally proclaimed, without embarrassment and without reserve. Awkward expedients are adopted to engraft on it precisely such notions and practices as might be suitable were God really such, after all, as Satan represents him to be,—a hard master,—and yet a weak and lenient judge. His grace is no longer free ; and the result is, that soon a system of penances and pardons is made to tamper with his righteousness ; and his holiness itself is found to admit of indulgence and compromise. But let us abide by the simplicity that is in Christ,—the simplicity which owns a sovereign authority in God's law, and a sovereign freeness in his salvation ; while, at the same time, it recognises the perfection of holiness in his nature, and rejoices, accordingly, in the “renewing of the Holy Ghost,” as perfecting holiness in ours. Let us, thus saved by the free grace and sanctified by the free Spirit of God, stand fast in the holy liberty with which Christ has made us free ; not being entangled again with the yoke of bondage, nor suffering our minds to be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ, by such subtlety as that through which the serpent succeeded in beguiling Eve.

VI.

THE FRUIT OF THE FIRST SIN—THE REMEDIAL SENTENCE.

GENESIS III. 6-21.

He that committeth sin is of the devil ; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.—1 JOHN iii. 8.

THE lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, make up, in the estimate of the apostle John (1 Epistle ii. 16), “all that is in the world,—which is not of the Father, but of the world.” These three carnal principles, the tempter successfully called into action, in the case of our mother Eve. The lust of the flesh he excited by the representation that “the tree was good for food,” and that the use of it should not have been withheld. The lust of the eye was beguiled by the “pleasant look” of the tree,—under which no danger or death could be supposed to lurk. The pride of life appeared in the ambition which aspired to an equality in knowledge or wisdom with God, and the self-confidence which presumed on the holiness of the creature being as able to stand the contact and contamination of known evil, as that of the Eternal Creator himself. “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her ; and he did eat” (ver. 6).

There is a question raised here, regarding the difference

between the woman's temptation and sin, and the man's. It is an idle question. The only scriptural ground for making any distinction is supposed to be found in the saying of the apostle, "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Tim. ii. 14). But the meaning there seems to be merely that the man was not the first to be deceived and transgress—that the woman took the lead in this guilty act,—not that their guilt ultimately was diverse. The impression naturally made by reading the narrative is, that Eve, in giving the fruit to Adam, repeated substantially the serpent's arguments, or at least used similar arguments herself, and that not till both had eaten were their eyes simultaneously opened. Certainly, in Scripture, Adam is represented as the party responsible for himself and his posterity (Rom. v. 12-21 ; 1 Cor. xv. 22-45). Hence, it has been supposed, not improbably, that it was with her husband's full knowledge and concurrence that Eve ate the fruit,—that they consulted together before eating, and sinned and fell together. Certainly they suffered together ; and together they obtained mercy.

The immediate effects of their act of disobedience were a sense of shame,—“the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (ver. 7) ; and a dread of judgment,—“Adam and his wife hid themselves,” through fear, as Adam afterwards admits—“I was afraid” (ver. 8, 10).

This was the fulfilment of the threatening—“Thou shalt surely die,—dying, thou shalt die.” There was present death felt, and future death feared. Literally, therefore, on the very day of their eating they died. Their own hearts condemned them,—hence their shame ;—God they knew to be greater than their hearts,—hence their fear. Both their shame and their fear had respect undoubtedly to their bodies. They were ashamed of their bodily nakedness—they were afraid of bodily death. But the real cause of shame was not in their bodily

members, but in the guilt of their souls ; and the real cause of fear was not their liability, as creatures of the dust, to dissolution, but their liability, as immortal and spiritual beings, to a far more awful doom. Their shame, therefore, and their fear, prove that they really died ; that having sinned, they in that very day came under the guilt and the curse of sin,—the guilt of sin, causing shame,—the curse of sin, causing fear. Such is their instant knowledge of evil.

But this is not all. Shame and fear cause them to shrink from God, and to hate his appearance—for now, “the carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. viii. 7). They feel that they have something to be concealed ; and as they contrive to cover their bodily nakedness from one another, so they would fain hide their moral guilt from their Maker. They fly from him whom they were wont to welcome—they seek a dark lurking-place among the trees of the garden. There, however, his hand finds them—they must meet their God ;—“And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou ?” (ver. 9).

As shame and fear drive them away from God, so, when they are brought into his presence, the same feelings still prevail, and prompt the last desperate expedient of deceit or guile, marking the extent of their subjection to bondage,—the bondage of corruption. They do not deny, but they palliate, their sin. Ungenerously and ungratefully, as well as impiously, Adam seems to charge, as the cause of his fault, God’s best gift to him : “The woman gave me of the tree.” Nay, in an indirect manner, he would even accuse God himself : “The woman whom thou gavest me, she gave me of the tree.” It was thou who gavest me this woman, who has occasioned my fall. Thus man, when tempted, is ready to say that he is tempted of God (ver. 12 ; James i. 13). Eve, again, has her apology also. She would cast the blame on the serpent : “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat” (ver. 13).

But both are without any real or valid excuse. Their sin

was wilful, committed against light and love ; in the face, too, of a warning from the God of truth, such as might have prepared them for Satan's lies. The attempt to extenuate their sin only proves how helplessly they are debased by it, as the slaves of a hard master, who, having them now at a disadvantage, through their forfeiture of the free favour of God, presses unrelentingly upon them, and compels them to be as false and unscrupulous as himself.

Shame, therefore, fear, and falsehood, are the bitter fruits of sin. Guilt is felt ; death is dreaded ; guile is practised. The consciousness of crime begets terror ; for "the wicked flee when no one pursueth." The sinner, no longer erect, bold, and true, before the open face of his God,—having that in him and about him which will not bear the light or stand in the judgment,—would bury himself out of view in obscure by-paths, and under a thick cloud of forest leaves.

How vain the attempt ; but how natural, when sin has darkened the mind ! We fancy that God sees us not, when it is only we that see not him ; we seek a shade or screen which may intercept our view of God, and feel as if it really intercepted also God's view of us ; and thus we are as self-confident in our ignorance or forgetfulness of God, as if it were he that was ignorant or forgetful of us. We resort to the trees of some garden,—the affairs or amusements of the world, the forms and ceremonies of religion, or its wordy technicalities, or its fervours and passions, or its busy activities ; nay, even the very means of grace themselves,—whatever, in short, may serve to fill a certain space, and bulk to a certain size, as a barrier between God and the heart that shrinks from too direct an approach to him. And we soothe ourselves with the notion that this hedge behind which we are sheltered serves the same purpose on God's side as on ours ; that he will not come nearer—with any narrower inspection or closer appeal—to us, than we are disposed to come to him. Then, when God does find us out,—when he calls us forth from our

concealment,—when, breaking in upon our refuges of lies, our well-contrived retreats of worldly indifference or spiritual delusion, he summons us at once to meet him, personally, face to face; when he convinces us of sin; how apt are we to evade his charge and to excuse ourselves. To what miserable shifts and apologies have we recourse,—casting the blame on one another,—on God's kind bounty,—or on the tempter's urgency of solicitation; when all the time we are conscious that the committing of the transgression was our own free choice,—that we did evil because we loved the doing of it.

How degrading is the bondage of sin! How entirely does it destroy all honesty and honour, as well as purity and peace! The sinner, once yielding to the tempter, is at his mercy. And having lost his hold of the truth of God, he is but too glad, for his relief from despair, to believe and to plead the lies of the devil.

God, however, has a better way. He has thoughts of love towards the guilty parents of our race. For the sentence which he goes on to pronounce, when he has called them before him, is not such as they might have expected. It is not retributive, but remedial, and in all its parts it is fitted exactly to meet their case.

I. In the first place, their complaint against the serpent is instantly attended to. He is judged and condemned:—"And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (ver. 14, 15).

Though the language here employed is applicable literally to the serpent, as a mere beast of the field, doomed to a grovelling life, and destined, from its venomous rancour, to be

ever the object of man's more powerful resentment,—the sentence must have been intended and understood in another sense also. Thus, licking or eating the dust, is uniformly made a sign of the defeat and degradation or submission of the adversaries of God and of his people. It is said of Christ that "his enemies shall lick the dust,"—and of the nations that they "shall lick the dust like a serpent," for fear of him (Ps. lxxii. 9 ; Micah vii. 17). Of his church also it is said, that "kings and their queens, once her oppressors, shall lick the dust of her feet" (Is. xlix. 23). And of the great enemy himself, with reference to the period of his final overthrow, it is said that "dust shall be the serpent's meat" (Is. lxv. 25). Then, again, Satan is represented as about to be bruised under the feet of Christ's believing people, and that shortly, by the God of peace (Rom. xvi. 20). And the whole description of his desperate struggle in the last dispensation (Rev. xii. 7-17), is evidently a comment on the brief announcement in this passage of Genesis. The shout of triumph is heard in heaven:—"For the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony." But not without a bruising of the church's heel, is this final bruising of Satan's head accomplished. For it is added, "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." There is a fierce persecution instigated by Satan, before his time is out. The victory, however, is not doubtful; already his ruin is anticipated in the courts of the sanctuary above.

Thus, the sentence pronounced upon the serpent, as the instrument of the temptation, reaches its real author. Satan, flushed with victory, is to be discomfited by the very race over which he has triumphed. And their success over him, it is particularly intimated, is to be the result, not of artful and insidious guile, but of open warfare. The contest may be

long, and he may gain partial conquests ; but in the end the issue is sure.

How far the phrase, "the seed of the woman," as here used, should be limited to the Messiah personally, is not very clear. The prophet Micah probably refers to this first prediction. Foretelling that "out of Bethlehem-Ephratah he is to come forth, who is to be ruler in Israel, and whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting," he adds, that deliverance is not to be "until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth ;"—intimating that it is of "the seed of the woman" he has been speaking (Micah v. 2, 3). And the apostle's argument would seem to apply here : "He saith, not seeds, as if there were many, but one seed, which is Christ" (Gal. iii. 16). Undoubtedly it is Christ who is principally pointed out ; though, at the same time, as the seed of the serpent may have a wider signification, denoting all of his party among men (Matt. iii. 7 ; John viii. 41) ; so, also, the seed of the woman may be held to mean all who take part with the Lord, and are one with him in his holy war. At all events, this condemnation of their tempter opened a door of hope to our race ; his defeat could scarcely fail to imply their deliverance.

But, it may be asked, what means this indirect mode of conveying such an assurance of mercy ? Why does God speak to the serpent, and not to our first parents themselves ? May it not be partly to intimate that the main and chief end of God, in the dispensation of grace, is his own glory ? "I do not this for your sakes," else I would address myself to you ; "but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned" (Ezek. xxxvi. 22, 23). It is not because they have deserved any thing at his hands, nor is it merely out of compassion to them, that he interferes. But it concerns his honour that the adversary should not triumph ; for his own name's sake he must needs be glorified in the overthrow of the great enemy, who has apparently frustrated the chief end of his creation of

the world. And does not this view render the assurance of mercy to our race even more strong and emphatic than if it were immediately given to themselves? It humbles our first parents, and us in them; and yet it encourages them and us. They blamed the serpent, and now the serpent is judged. They even charged God foolishly; as if it were his fault that the devil had beguiled them; and now they see that so far from God being, in any sense, accessory to their temptation, his glory is thereby so assailed that it can be vindicated only in the instant condemnation, and final destruction, of the tempter who has prevailed over them.

All this, however, will be better understood when it is seen, in the end of time, what is the purpose of God in first exposing our nature to trial at Satan's hand, and then making that very nature the instrument of Satan's more terrible ruin. Meantime it is plain that it is in part, at least, for the settlement of God's controversy with Satan, that our race and our world are spared; the fall and recovery of mankind being made subservient to the completion of God's purpose of wrath against a previous host of rebels, whose malignity was thus to be more fully brought out, that in their utter and eternal misery, God's righteous severity might be more signally glorified.

II. Having disposed of the serpent, the sentence proceeds, secondly, to deal with his victims more directly, and announces to both the woman and the man a period of prolonged existence on the earth. Their fear is, in so far, postponed. The woman is still to bear children,—the man is still to find food.

This prolonged existence is to be to Adam and his partner, as well as to their posterity, nothing more, in the meantime, than a dispensation of long-suffering. It is to be of the nature of a respite granted to criminals under sentence of death. But such a respite, in the case of sentenced felons, does not imply their exemption, during the interval of post-

poned retribution, from all tokens of their condemned state. On the contrary, they are all the time under prison discipline. And even though, in many instances, the respite may ultimately end in a free pardon, there are hardships inseparable from their intermediate position, and fitted to prepare them the better for their final deliverance. Hence the sentence, suspending generally the doom of death, has some drawbacks connected with it. 1. The woman is to live, and to be the mother of living children, being called Eve on that very account (ver. 20);—but she is to bring forth children in sorrow (ver. 16). 2. She is to be subject to her husband; for such is the import of the phrase, “Unto him shall be thy desire, and he shall rule over thee” (ver. 16); it denotes the dependence of affection or of helplessness on the one hand, and the assertion of authority and power on the other. 3. The man, also, is to bear the punishment of sin (ver. 18); the earth, indeed, is not to refuse its return of food to his labour; but that labour is to be with sweat of face and anxiety of heart, not light and joyous as it was before. And, 4. both he and his are to lie under the doom of vanity and mortality; “for dust he is, and unto dust he must return” (ver. 17). This universal liability to death,—the constant memento and memorial of guilt,—planting a thorn in every pleasure and making love itself a source of pain, is the standing and too unquestionable evidence of the real nature of the sentence which spared mankind on the earth. It is a sentence suspending judgment, indeed, but still plainly indicating both the bitterness of sin, and the reality of wrath to come.

But let us thank God that the dispensation of free grace, to which the dispensation of long-suffering patience is subordinate and subservient,—for the sake of which, in fact, it is appointed,—makes special provision for alleviating these elements of suffering in man’s present state. In the gospel there are promises of good, corresponding to the several conditions of severity under which the tenure of a prolonged season of

mercy is granted; and by these promises, in the case of believers, the inevitable ills of life are soothed.

Thus, in the first place, over against the pain and sorrow of conception to which the woman is doomed, is to be set the promise, that, "although she was first in the transgression, nevertheless continuing in faith, and charity, and holiness, with sobriety, she shall be saved in child-bearing" (1 Tim. ii. 15). Again, secondly, to meet her case, as made subject to the man, she is invested with a new right to his full and reciprocal affection; husbands being adjured to love their wives even as Christ loves the church, which he has redeemed with his own blood (Eph. v. 25-33); the real explanation this, as I may observe in passing, of the marvellous influence of the gospel of Christ in restoring woman to her true place in society, and investing her, as wife and mother, with her best patent of nobility. Further, thirdly, although the earth is cursed for man's sake, and in all labour now there must be sweat and sorrow,—there is an assurance to believers, that if they cast their care on the Lord, he will care for them; and if they seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all those things" about which men are wont to be anxious, "shall be freely added unto them" (Matt. vi. 33). And finally, in the fourth place, the doom of mortality to which believers are still subjected, is relieved by the prospect of rest in their departure from this life, and of a glorious resurrection beyond the grave; for "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. cxvi. 15); and it is their privilege to utter the undaunted challenge,—“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. xv. 55-57).

III. And now, Satan being put aside, who, as the father of lies, prompted guile,—and death being postponed, so as to give hope instead of fear,—the sentence goes on to provide for

the removal of the shame which sin had caused :—" Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them " (ver. 21). The animals whose skins were made into clothing could not be slain for food, for animal food was not yet allowed to man. In all likelihood they were slain in sacrifice. If so, it must have been by God's appointment. The covering of the nakedness of our first parents with the skins of these animals, represented the way in which sin is covered, by the imputed worthiness of the great Sacrifice,—the righteousness of the Lamb slain for its remission.

Thus the sentence is complete, as a remedial provision for the disorder introduced by the fall. Its last and crowning blessing depends upon the other two, and necessarily fits into them, and follows from them. Hence I have the greater confidence in drawing from a very brief, and apparently almost incidental intimation, a large spiritual inference. The fact of the Lord God clothing our first parents with coats of skin is shortly enough stated ; but the argument which it suggests for the divine appointment of animal sacrifices is strong and cogent.

The very fact that the Lord God himself "made," or ordained, this particular kind of clothing, is significant. It would scarcely have been necessary that he should thus interfere, had it been merely a contrivance for decency or comfort that was needed. In that matter, Adam and his wife might have been left to their own resources. When God concerns himself with the materials of their dress, something higher and holier must be intended. Does he care for the difference between a covering of fig-leaves and coats of skins ? No. But the skins have a spiritual meaning, arising out of the sacrificial use of the beasts to which they belonged. And as the clothing of skins is thus appointed by God, so also must be the sacrificial use of the victims furnishing the skins.

But besides this inference from the verse itself, its connection with the whole following history—in which the practice

of animal sacrifices is manifestly taken for granted as having the sanction of God—suggests irresistibly the idea that the divine origin of the rite is here implied. And it is implied in the very manner in which we might expect it to be so,—in a writing addressed to men familiar with the subject. No Israelite living under the dispensation of Moses, when reading the account of God's clothing our first parents with skins, and afterwards accepting Abel's offering of a lamb, could have a moment's hesitation in concluding that, from the beginning, the sacrificial institute formed an essential part of the service which God required of fallen man.

It is interesting to observe the correspondence between the temptation to this first sin,—the result of it,—and the remedial sentence pronounced. This may be exhibited in a tabular form :—

<i>Temptations to Sin.</i>	<i>Results of Sin.</i>	<i>Remedies (in the inverse order from the preceding).</i>
1. The pride of merit (1-3).	1. The shame of guilt (7).	1. Satan's condemnation, restoring to man the liberty of TRUTH (14, 15).
2. The presumption of security (4).	2. The fear of death (10).	2. God's dispensation of long-suffering, restoring HOPE (16-20).
3. The ambition of an equality with God (5).	3. The guile of bondage to Satan (12, 13).	3. God's provision of an atoning sacrifice and justifying righteousness, restoring CONFIDENCE OF FAITH (21).

The first element in the temptation was a sense of merit, disposing man to claim the divine bounty, as if it were his right, and to consider himself unfairly treated if any restriction were imposed upon it. Corresponding to this, the first consequence of the sin was a sense of shame—a feeling of nakedness. When he was tempted to sin, he disparaged the goodness of God and exaggerated his own; when he had actually sinned, he shrank from God and was ashamed of himself.

The second element in the temptation was a sense of security,—giving him unwarrantable confidence in braving the Divine justice. And as the analogous counterpart, the second effect of the sin was a sense of danger,—causing him even to flee when none was pursuing.

The third element in the temptation was a sense of liberty ; defying control and asserting independence ; aspiring to the freedom of the Godhead. The third effect of the sin was the fitting sequel of that—a sense of bondage. Man knew evil, but not so as to retain superiority over it. He became the slave of the evil one. His tempter became his tyrant, exercised dominion over him, and constrained him to meet the accusations of his conscience and his God, by having recourse to the miserable shifts of servile cowardice and guile.

For these three melancholy fruits of sin the sentence provides appropriate remedies ; but they are applied in the reverse order. The last is first met. By victory gained over the evil power, his victims are delivered from his degrading thralldom, and are at liberty to appear again undisguisedly before the Holy One,—to lay aside all guile, and submit themselves unreservedly to God. Thereupon God, dealing with them himself, apart from all the claims and contrivances of Satan,—taking the whole matter of the sinner's standing before him into his own hands, and exercising his high and sovereign prerogative, —grants a respite from death. And in the third place, to complete his purpose of love, he provides for the covering of sin's nakedness and shame, and for the sinner's acceptance in his sight ; clothing him with a perfect righteousness, the righteousness of a full and finished work of vicarious obedience and expiatory blood.

Thus is the sinner rescued from Satan's wiles, and made free to meet his God, once more, without fear and without shame. And thus also is man,—redeemed man,—advanced ultimately to a higher point in the scale of intelligent and

moral being, than unfallen man could ever have reached ; in as much as victory over evil transcends mere exemption from it. He has known evil, as well as good ; and through his very knowledge of the evil, he now knows the good all the more. The seed of the woman prevails,—not by withdrawing from the power of evil, or consenting to any compromise with it,—but by conquering it, through experience of its malignity, and endurance of its worst and last infliction. The seed of the serpent does his utmost ; but the seed of the woman passes through the fiery trial unhurt,—save only that his heel is bruised. This is all the mischief that the adversary can do,—even when allowed his fullest scope,—and he does it at the expense of his own head. For now the seed of the woman,—the serpent's seed being thus thoroughly baffled,—obtains a new grant of life on a new footing before God, and is invested with a new covering,—so that the shame of his nakedness may appear no more.

Behold here, O my soul, the travail of his soul, who is pre-eminently the Seed of the woman. He put himself in thy place, and encountered thine adversary. Satan, the prince of this world, came to him—to tempt—to try—to accuse and subdue him. But he had nothing in him (John xiv. 30, 31). He might indeed bruise his heel, but he could not touch a hair of his head. He met more than his match in the seed of the very woman whom he had beguiled. Jesus, in his utmost trial, when he knew evil as none but he—the HOLY ONE—could know it, in its stinging guilt and heavy curse, still triumphed over its power. And this same Seed of the woman has also won, by his laborious obedience, a new life for himself and his people. By the one sacrifice of himself, offered once for all to the Father, he has brought in an everlasting righteousness, and perfected for ever all them that are sanctified.

Thus, to Jesus, the Seed of the woman, thou owest, O my guilty and enslaved soul, God's true liberty instead of Satan's lying bondage—prolonged life instead of instant death—and

instead of the shame of thine own nakedness the white raiment of the worthiness of the Lamb that was slain. Only be thou united to Jesus as thy Saviour,—be one with him, as the Seed of the woman,—and thou art partaker with him in his victory—his life—his beauty. Here indeed, in this present world, thy salvation may not be complete. In the protracted struggle with Satan thou mayest receive many a wound. In thy labour there may be toil and sweat. The sense of thine infirmity, for thou art a child of the dust, may cause thee sorrow; and the sense of thy nakedness, for thou art prone to sin, may cause thee shame. Still be thou in Christ; abiding in him as the Seed of the woman and thy Saviour; and thou shalt have confidence and good hope through grace. Satan may wound thee, but only in thy heel. His own head is bruised; and he has no power over thee,—no power to keep thee under condemnation,—no power to keep thee under bondage,—no power to prevail against thee, either as the accuser or as the oppressor. Then, though thou hast toil and travail, thou hast life too,—life in him who liveth and was dead, and is alive for evermore. Thou art among the really living, of whom Eve is now become the mother. And finally, though the shame of thy nakedness often troubles thee, thou hast always a covering provided for thee. Thou art arrayed in white robes, washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. viii. 13, 14).

VIL.

THE FIRST FORM OF THE NEW DISPENSATION—THE
CONTEST BEGUN BETWEEN GRACE AND NATURE.

GENESIS III. 22 ; IV. 15.

PART FIRST.

By faith, Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts ; and by it he, being dead, yet speaketh.—HEBREWS xi. 14.

THOUGH excluded from the garden of Eden, man is not sent to any great distance from it, and is not separated from all connection with it. He is indeed expelled ; and a reason is assigned for his expulsion of a very solemn and mysterious nature—"The Lord God said, Behold the man is become as one of us to know good and evil : and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever ; therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken " (chap. iii. 22, 23). The transaction is represented according to human usage. There is, as it were, deliberation in the heavenly court before the decree goes forth ; and the ground of it is stated, not ironically, as some suppose ; for the Lord, on this occasion, is full of pity ; but in gravest seriousness. By violating the condition of obedience, of which the one tree was the sacramental symbol, man has lost all title to the privilege of life, which the other tree sacramentally signified and sealed. His act of disobedience—with the knowledge of evil and subjection to evil which it entailed on him—deprived him of the

power of tasting the pure delights of the life of which that tree was the pledge and means. Not till sin is expiated, and death swallowed up in victory, is man again admitted to the tree of life, and he is then entitled and enabled to enjoy it upon even a higher footing than he did originally—not as ignorant of evil, but as now really Godlike, knowing it in Christ, and in Christ triumphing over it. But mark the grace of God ; and how, in wrath, he remembers mercy. He does not break off man's connection with the blessed garden altogether. Even paradise lost is made to appear, in the eyes of those who worshipped in faith before its gates, as already virtually paradise regained.

I. For it is most probable that the stated place of worship, under the new order of things, was the immediate neighbourhood of the garden : “So he drove out the man : and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubims and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life ” (chap. iii. 24).

These cherubims are very generally regarded as angels, appointed to keep back all who might presumptuously dare to approach the now forbidden gates. There is no more entrance for sinful man by the old path of a direct personal obedience. He must enter now, if at all, by the new and living way of the Saviour's righteousness. The Law, with its ministers of flaming fire, drives men away. It is the Gospel which sets angels at all the doors to bid men welcome once more (Rev. xxi. 12).

It may be doubted, however, if this name “cherub,” or “cherubim,” ever denotes angels. This is the first mention of cherubim in the Bible ; and in mentioning them, the sacred writer speaks of them as familiar and well known to those whom he addresses. He gives no description or explanation of them—he simply says, “God placed cherubims” (or more literally, the cherubim) “at the east of the garden.” Such language would surely be understood as denoting the same kind of cherubim with which the Israelites were already ac-

quainted. Now these are described in the book of Exodus (Exod. xxv. 18). They were gorgeous golden figures, bending over the mercy-seat, and having the glory of God resting upon them, and the voice of God going forth from between them. The same figures were placed afterwards in the holy place of the temple (1 Kings vi. 23); and it is most likely that Solomon increased their number to four, adding two new ones to the two formerly in use in the tabernacle. Cherubim were embroidered on the curtains of the tabernacle (Exod. xxvi. 1), and on the great veil which divided the holy place and the most holy (Exod. xxvi. 31). They were also engraved on the walls of the temple (1 Kings vi. 29-35); where, as if to identify them with the cherubim placed near the pleasant trees of the garden, they are described as interspersed with palms and flowers. Thus we find that cherubim formed an essential part of the furniture or apparatus of the holy place, where the Lord was understood to manifest himself in the character in which he is worshipped by sacrifice. It is one of the attributes of the Lord's throne, or his seat, or his chariot, that the cherubim are with him. Whether he is represented as at rest, or as in motion, the glorious symbol of his presence, in flaming fire, is associated with these accompaniments (Numb. vii. 89; Ps. lxxx. 1, and xcix. 1; xviii. 10).

But the fullest view of the cherubim is given in the visions of Ezekiel, where we have a description of their outward appearance. They were compound figures, each having the face of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, with a human body in the upper part, but with wings, and with somewhat of the form of the other animals beneath (Ezek. i. 4, and x. 2). The pictures of the cherubim, indeed, are obscure; in the main, however, they agree in representing them as emblematic figures of animals. Man is prominently their head; but he appears with the peculiar prerogatives of other animals allied to his own. And in all the visions of Ezekiel, as well as in the other passages already referred to, we recognise them as forming part of

the train or attendance of Jehovah, in his resting, as well as in his movements from place to place.

Finally, these same cherubim, or living creatures—called, rather unhappily, in our version, “the four beasts,”—appear in the Apocalyptic vision of John (Rev. iv. 6, etc.), as taking a conspicuous share in the worship of the heavenly sanctuary.

Thus we trace the cherubim, from their first appearance in the garden of Eden to their manifestation in the glorious pattern which John saw of the Redeemer’s triumphal court and throne. And if we now reverse this process, and retrace them from the last to the first book of the Bible, we may form a probable opinion respecting their symbolical meaning. In the Revelation (v. 6-14, and vii. 11), they are expressly distinguished from angels, and represented as, along with the twenty-four elders, assenting to the strains which the angels raise. In answer to the angelic hymn, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” and in glad accord with the doxology of universal nature, “Blessing and honour, and glory and power, be unto Him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever,”—the four beasts, with the worshipping elders, are heard saying, “Amen.” Again (xiv. 3), along with the twenty-four elders, they are seen presiding over the vast multitude of the followers of the Lamb, “on the mount Sion,” in the singing of the new song which none could learn but they who were redeemed from the earth. They are not, therefore, angelic, but human symbols, in some way associated with the church or redeemed creation; and they are significant of its glorious power and beauty, as presented before the throne of God and of the Lamb. The very same character may be ascribed to the living creatures of Ezekiel’s visions, and to the cherubim, wherever they are mentioned in the Old Testament. They typify and shadow the complete church, gathered out of all times and nations, and from the four corners of the world, waiting in attendance on her Lord and Saviour, in his redeeming glory.

Thus in the holy place of the tabernacle and of the temple,

the mercy-seat sprinkled with atoning blood—the cherubim bending over and looking upon it—the glory of the Lord, the bright Shechinah light resting in the midst—fitly express, in symbol, the redemption, the redeemed, and the Redeemer. It is a symbolical representation of believers, having their steadfast eyes fixed on the propitiation, whereby God is brought once more to dwell among them. It is Jehovah meeting, in infinite complacency, with the church which atoning blood has bought and cleansed. And thus always, when faith beholds God as the God of salvation, he appears in state with the same retinue. Angels, indeed, are in waiting; but it is upon or over the cherubim that he rides forth—it is between the cherubim that he dwells. The church ever contemplates him as her own, and sees him rejoicing over her in love.

The cherubim placed at the east of paradise after it was lost, surely bore the same import. In connection with the flaming sword, they marked the place in which the Lord manifested himself, and towards which he was to be worshipped. That fiery emblem might represent the terror of the divine justice—if we are not rather to identify it with the brightness of the Shechinah-glory which afterwards shone in the bush, in the temple, and on the way to Damascus. The cherubic figures, on the other hand, betokened the grace of the church's redemption. These together kept the way of the tree of life.

The worshippers, as they stood, awed, yet hopeful, around the gate of paradise, felt their exclusion from the blessedness within. But they saw a human figure mysteriously fashioned there—they saw a pledge of the restitution. That there was, in the primitive worship, a holy place, where the presence of the Lord was manifested, is plain from the language used in respect to the bringing of offerings—"they brought them unto the Lord"—to some set or appointed spot (chap. iv. 3, 4); and also from what is said of the exile of Cain—"he went out from the presence of the Lord"—from the place where the Lord revealed himself by symbol and by oracle to those who

worshipped at his altar (chap. iv. 16). And it would seem that this primitive holy place was substantially identical with the shrine of the Levitical ritual, and with the heavenly scene which Ezekiel and John saw. It was within the garden, or at its very entrance, and it was distinguished by a visible display of the glory of God, in a bright shining light, or sword of flame—on the one hand driving away in just displeasure a guilty and rebellious race; but on the other hand shining with a benignant smile upon the typical emblems or representations of a world and a people redeemed.

Thus, near the seat of original innocence—which now was by expressive symbols presented to his view in a new and still attractive light, as the seat of the glory of redemption—Adam and his seed were to worship and serve God.

A seed accordingly was given to him. Two sons were born, probably at one birth, since it is not said of Eve that she conceived again and bare Abel (which is the usual scriptural form in intimating a second birth), but simply that she bore him after Cain. “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord. And she again bare his brother Abel” (chap. iv. 1, 2). That a difference was from the very first put between the two by Eve, and it may be presumed by her husband also, is plain from the remarkable language which she applies to the first-born, “I have gotten a man from the LORD;” and, indeed, from the very names given to the two brothers respectively. Cain signifies acquisition or gain; Abel, vanity or loss. Whence this difference thus early put by their parents between the two sons, born at the same time, and in precisely the same circumstances? Already, it would seem, it was understood that the race was to be divided into two great sections, of which the one only was to be reckoned as truly and spiritually the seed of the woman,—while the other bore the character, and fell under the doom, of the seed of the serpent. Possibly Eve regarded her first-born as the very individual who was

to be the Saviour, and understood at the same time that this Saviour was to be a divine person. So some at least interpret her words,—“I have gotten a man,” or the man, “the LORD,” the very Jehovah—him who is God as well as man. More probably, however, taking the words as they stand, “I have gotten a man from the LORD,” we are to consider her as simply recognising his birthright, and so welcoming him as peculiarly the heir of the promise. At all events, it is plain that in her judgment Cain was chosen rather than his brother. But the election of grace is otherwise, as the sequel too clearly proves.

Thus, in the very beginning of the dispensation of grace, the sovereignty of God is manifested, according to the principle,—“Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated” (Mal. i. 2, 3; Rom. ix. 11-13). And thus, too, it is seen that God “judgeth not as man judgeth,” and that no privileges of the flesh will avail in his sight. Cain is the first-born,—the heir. His parents receive him as a prize; while his brother is in comparison but lightly esteemed. How blind is the wisdom, how false the confidence of man! Cain, whose birth was so welcome, is the lost one. He whose very name was “Vanity,” becomes the first inheritor of the blessedness of the redeemed.

Their different occupations have been supposed to mark a difference of rank and station. “Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground” (ver. 2). Cain, as the first-born, follows his father’s calling, being lord of the soil; Abel, as in some degree subordinate, tends the cattle. The division of labour, as well as the difference of ranks, being thus early introduced, may be regarded as not only suitable to the condition of man, but agreeable to the appointment of God. It is his will that men should differ in their tastes, talents, and pursuits; and that in different spheres they should serve one another. But all such differences are of no account in the kingdom of his grace and glory.

II. The brothers, representatives of the two great classes

into which, in a religious view, the family of man is divided, manifest their difference in this respect, not in the object, nor in the time, but in the spirit, of their worship. "And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof" (ver. 3, 4).

They worship the same God, and under the same revelation of his power and glory. Their seasons of worship also are the same; for it is agreed on all hands that the expression, "in process of time," or "at the end of days," denotes some stated season, most probably the weekly Sabbath. Again, their manner of service was to a large extent the same. They presented offerings to God; and these offerings, being of two kinds, corresponded very remarkably to the two kinds of offerings ordained under the Levitical dispensation—those which were properly expiatory, and those which were mainly expressive of duty, gratitude, and devotion.

Hence it would seem that the service of God, even thus early, had in it all the elements which we afterwards find in the Mosaic ritual,—a holy place, where the symbols of the divine glory and of human redemption appeared;—stated times or seasons of devotion; in particular, the weekly Sabbath;—and an appointed manner of worship, consisting of offerings of different kinds. The religion of fallen man has always been the same.

Especially it has been the same in the way of fallen man's approach to his offended God; which has always been through blood, and the same blood,—the blood of "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. xiii. 8). With this blood of THE LAMB, the blood of Abel's sacrifice is expressly associated by the apostle, when he speaks of "the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel" (Heb. xii. 24). In that sublime passage, Paul is reminding believers of their peculiar privileges, as living under the

economy of the gospel; and, among the rest, he mentions "the blood of sprinkling,"—the blood of Jesus,—“which speaketh better things,”—which more effectually purges the conscience and gives peace,—than the blood of mere animal sacrifices could do. For “the blood of Abel” there referred to is not the blood of his slain body crying for vengeance;—it would not be to the purpose of the apostle’s argument to compare or contrast Christ’s blood with Abel’s, in that sense of it. It is the blood which Abel shed when he offered his sacrifice that is intended,—the blood of such sacrifices as he presented, and all the faithful continued to present, until Christ died. Such blood could speak of pardon and reconciliation only symbolically and typically. The blood of Christ speaks of the real blessing really purchased and bestowed.*

Still Abel did well to present the blood of his lamb,—not as in itself the ground of his acceptance,—but as the token of his reliance for acceptance on the better sacrifice which his lamb prefigured. He worshipped in faith,—recognising and realising his own fallen state, and beholding both the glory of the righteous Judge, requiring satisfaction for sin, and the glory of the gracious Father, reconciling the sinner to himself. Through this faith alone could he acceptably present an offering to God,—whether it was such a burnt-offering as he did present, or such a meat-offering of thankfulness and peace as Cain chose to bring. To present either, in any other spirit, must be sin. To trust in the mere animal sacrifice,—the mere bodily service,—would have been superstition. To reject that sacrifice, in its spiritual and typical meaning, and to appear before God, with whatever gifts, without atoning blood, as Cain did,—was infidelity.

III. The two brothers, then, worshipped God according to the same ritual; but not with the same acceptance. How the

* See exposition of the passage in my Lectures on the Fatherhood of God. Appendix II.

Lord signified his complacency in the one, and his rejection of the other, does not appear. It may have been by sending fire from heaven to consume Abel's offering; as in this way he acknowledged acceptable offerings, on different occasions, in after times (Lev. ix. 24; Judges vi. 21; 1 Kings xviii. 38). Why the Lord put such a distinction between them is a more important point, and more easily ascertained. It is unequivocally explained by the Apostle Paul (Heb. xi. 4). Abel's sacrifice was more excellent than Cain's, because he offered it by faith. Therefore his person was accepted as righteous,—and his gift as well pleasing to the Lord.

This agrees with the history, in which it is not said that God had respect to Abel's sacrifice, and then to himself; but, first, he had respect to Abel, and then to his offering. So it must ever be. The acceptance of the person must precede the acceptance of the service; and the acceptance of the person is by faith. The sacrifice of Abel had no more efficacy, in itself, than the offering of Cain, to recommend him to the favour of God. He was not accepted on account of his offering; nor was Cain rejected on account of his. But Abel believed; and through his faith he received a justifying righteousness in the sight of God, even God's own righteousness in which he believed,—the finished and accepted righteousness of "the Seed of the woman," who is no other than the Son of God himself (Rom. i. 17, and iii. 21). And the sacrifice which he offered as the expression of his faith, and of his appropriation of the righteousness which is by faith, became, on that account, a sacrifice of a sweet-smelling savour (Gen. viii. 21; Exod. xxix. 18). Cain, on the other hand, presented an offering which also, in its own place, and had it been presented in faith, would have been accepted by God. Had he first been reconciled to God, through the justifying righteousness and atoning blood of the promised Seed of the woman,—and had he then, in token of that reconciliation, and in the exercise of faith in that righteousness, offered the appointed typical

sacrifice of expiation,—“he would have obtained witness that he was righteous” (Heb. ix. 4), that he was accepted as righteous, and that his heart, submitting to God’s righteousness, was now right with God. And thereafter, in the character of one righteous,—justified, reconciled, and renewed, he might have come with his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, presenting the first-fruits of his substance, in grateful pledge of his willing dedication of himself, and all that he had, to God. Such offerings of a material substance God himself ordained under the law, to be typical and emblematic of the new obedience which his people must willingly render, after having made a covenant with him by sacrifice of another kind (Ps. l. 5-15). And similar offerings, but of a more spiritual and moral nature, he still requires, under the dispensation of the gospel, when he calls upon believers “to present their bodies a living sacrifice to him” (Rom. xii. 1), “to offer the sacrifice of praise continually, that is, the fruit of their lips, giving thanks to his name,” and “to do good and to communicate, since with such sacrifices he is well pleased” (Heb. xiii. 15, 16).

Such might have been the meaning, and such the acceptance of Cain’s offering, had he first himself “obtained witness that he was righteous,” in terms of the righteousness of God appropriated by faith. Then, “God would have testified of his gifts.” But Cain went about to establish a righteousness of his own. He brought his offering as one entitled, in his own name, to present it,—as one seeking, by means of it, to conciliate or satisfy his God. His was not the guileless simplicity and uprightness of a sinner receiving a free pardon, and, in consequence, rendering a free service,—forgiven much, and therefore loving much. It was the cold and calculating homage of contented self-confidence, paying, more or less conscientiously, its due to God, with heart unbroken by any true sense of sin, and spirit unsubdued by any melting sight of the riches of redeeming love. Hence, “unto Cain and to his offering, the Lord had not respect” (ver. 5).

PART SECOND.—UNBELIEF WORKING BY WRATH, MALICE,
AND ENVY.

CHAP. IV. 5-15.

Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.—1 JOHN iii. 12.

I. THE Lord did not all at once finally reject Cain; on the contrary, he gave him an opportunity of finding acceptance still, as Abel had found it. The very intimation of his rejection was a merciful dealing with Cain, and ought to have been so received by him, and improved for leading him to humiliation, penitence, and faith. Instead of being humbled, however, he is irritated and provoked. "Cain," it is said, "was very wroth, and his countenance fell" (ver. 5). Still, the Lord visits him, and graciously condescends to plead and expostulate with him. He points out the unreasonableness of such a state of mind: "And the Lord said unto Cain, why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him" (ver. 6, 7).

If we take "sin" here to mean "a sin-offering,"—as not a few eminent scholars have done,—the Lord's expostulation is very gracious.

Cain has no right to complain, and no reason to despair. He has no right to complain of his not being favourably received, as if a wrong were done to him,—as if he were deprived of his due. He knows, that "if he doeth well, he will certainly be accepted;" and if he stands on the footing of right, this is all that he is entitled to claim,—that if his obedience be perfect, he shall be rewarded. But there is another alternative. At the worst, be his case ever so bad, he has no reason to despair. If he will but consent to stand on another footing—

not of right but of grace—then, though he has failed in “doing well,” or rendering a perfect obedience to his God, he may still, as one guilty, find acceptance. There is a “sin-offering.” And it is not far to seek; it is near; it lies at “his very door.” Nor is it difficult to obtain possession of it. He does not need to buy it, or to work for it; it is already at his disposal, and subject to him; it may be appropriated and used by him as his own; it is his for the taking. It is waiting his pleasure, and as it were courting his acceptance: “its desire is to him.” And he may at once avail himself of it: “he may rule over it”* (iv. 7, iii. 16).

* I hesitate between this interpretation and another one suggested by a learned friend; which also makes the Lord’s remonstrance very gracious.

“Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?” Wilt thou mend matters by thine angry and sullen gloom? Nay, there is a more excellent way. Retrace thy steps. Do as Abel did. And if like him thou doest well, thou canst have no doubt of thine acceptance. Thy rueful and downcast looks will be changed into the radiant gladness of a spirit in which there is no guile. But, on the other hand, beware. If thou rejectest the only true and effectual remedy,—if thou doest not well,—think not that any passionate complaint or moody discontent of thine will avail for thy relief. Sin—the sin to which by complying with its solicitations thou hast given the mastery over thee,—is not thus to be got rid of. Nay, thou canst not keep it at a distance, or even at arm’s length. It lieth at thy door; ever crouching for thee; ever ready to fawn upon thee for farther concessions, and then to grasp thee in its fangs of remorse and shame and terror. One only manner of dealing with sin can be either safe or successful. Treat it as thy father Adam was empowered to treat his Eve to whom he had so easily yielded. He is not again to be so fond and facile. He is to keep her in her right place. And whatever influence her blandishments may have over him as “her desire is toward him,” he is to assert his manly prerogative of reason and conscience and “rule over her.” Sin is to thee, Cain, what Eve, alas! was to Adam. Nor canst thou shake it off, however angry and gloomy thou mayest be,—any more than Adam, if he had desired it, could have shaken off the temptress with whom for better and for worse he was irrevocably united. She was part of himself—his very flesh. But she need not on that account be suffered to

The enmity of his carnal mind, however, prevailed. Cain would not be subject to the law of God;—nor would he submit himself to the righteousness of God. He thought that he did well to be angry. And as his wrath could not reach the great Being of whom chiefly he complained, he vented it on his brother, who was within his reach. Being of the wicked one, he slew his brother. “And Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him” (ver. 8).

exert a sway over him inconsistent with his manhood or injurious to his godliness. Let him assert the right that belongs to him, and wield even over the wife of his bosom, should he be in danger of becoming again too compliant, the power with which for that very end the Lord himself has invested him. So, in like manner, let Cain deal with what has now become his domestic foe. Let him stand upon his right as a man,—especially as a man acquainted with the great principle of the economy under which he lives; “the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head, while the serpent again shall bruise his heel.” Let him cast himself manfully—believingly—into the deadly strife here depicted; let him vindicate the power that belongs to him if he will but identify himself with that “seed of the woman;” let him not suffer sin to have dominion over him, but rather enter into the great Redeemer’s victory over sin; and there need be no more dark thoughts and scowling looks, for all may yet be well.

It will be seen that in both of these interpretations, the latter clause of ver. 7 is not applied to Cain’s relationship to Abel, as many expounders have applied it. The allusion which they suppose to be made to Cain having forfeited the birthright, and having an opportunity of recovering it, is not happy. On the other hand, whether we take “sin-offering,” or “sin,” to be the word in the preceding clause, there is great propriety and point in the comparison, either of a sinner’s command through grace over the appointed victim, or of a believer’s command over sin, to the husband’s right over the wife. In either case, the objection to the feminine noun “sin offering,” or “sin,” having a masculine pronoun connected with it, is obviated by the personification “lying at the door” (Deut. ix. 21).

I do not venture to dogmatise; but I own that after leaning a good deal to the second interpretation, my preference for the former has rather returned upon me.

He had been talking with Abel his brother, whether in friendship, or in controversy, or partly and successively in both ways, does not appear from the narrative. His talk may have been a subtle trap to beguile his unwary brother. If, as many think, Abel is to be viewed as the type of Him who was accounted "vanity"—a worm and no man—despised and rejected of men—who, at the same time, was meek and lowly of heart—being led as a lamb to the slaughter, and opening not his mouth against his persecutors; we may be justified in applying to the first martyr the very passages in the Psalms which describe both the smooth treachery and the open violence of which Jesus—the faithful witness—was the object (Ps. lv. 21, lvii. 4). At anyrate Cain talked, smoothly or sharply, with Abel; but not so as seriously to awaken suspicion or alarm in his brother's mind. They were together in the field. Abel having faith towards God, is ready to place confidence in his brother also. Cain adds to his ungodliness the sin of envy and hatred, and the crime of murder.

II. Returning from the field, Cain scruples not apparently to revisit the sanctuary—the very "presence of the Lord;" for it is afterwards said that upon receiving his sentence, he went out from thence (ver. 16). He seems to think that he may calmly meet both his parents and his God. He even assumes an air of defiance. He feels almost as if he were the wronged and injured party. When the solemn and searching question is put, "Where is Abel thy brother?"—"I know not," is his impatient and unfeeling reply—"Am I my brother's keeper?" (ver. 9.) My brother might have kept himself. Or his God, with whom, as it turns out, he was so great a favourite, might have kept him.

Thus the infidel regards religion, in the persons of its professors, as insulting and injurious to himself. He is not its keeper. It is no concern of his to save its credit or its character; rather he may be justified in putting it out of his way as

best he can. So Cain exults in his success, in thus easily getting the better of the feeble and unprotected simplicity of his righteous brother, and almost upbraids the Lord with the little care that he seems to take of his own.

But though the righteous is suffered to fall before the wicked, the wicked is not to be allowed to escape. His boasting is vain. Abel, indeed, was the unsuspecting and unresisting victim of his brother; silently and meekly he suffered wrong. But his "blood" had a "voice" (ver. 10); for "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. cxvi. 15, and lxxii. 14); and "He maketh inquisition for blood" (Ps. ix. 12). Abel is the first of that noble army of martyrs, "whose righteous blood" was to come on the generation that rejected the Lord (Matt. xxiii. 35); and whose souls, under the altar, still cry with a loud voice against the dwellers on the earth (Rev. vi. 9, 10). Cain, on the other hand, is doomed to be a castaway.

It is true, the first murderer does not immediately receive the doom of murder, which is death by the hand of man. On the contrary, his life is specially preserved. It is to be observed, however, that he is apprehensive of that doom. "It shall come to pass," he says, "that every one that findeth me shall slay me;" any chance passenger, recognising me as a murderer, will feel himself entitled to be my executioner (ver. 14). So strong, indeed, and so well founded is this apprehension of Cain's, that it needs to be allayed by a token of security given to himself—"The Lord set a mark on him, lest any finding him should kill him." Nor is even this enough. His life is still farther guarded by a threatening of aggravated judgment against any who should venture to inflict upon him that sentence of death which, but for this express prohibition, all his fellows might have felt themselves justified in inflicting—"Therefore, whosoever killeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold" (ver. 15).

In all this it is evidently implied that the law, according

to which the murderer is to be slain by his fellows, is the original law of God and nature. Cain, when his conscience is in part awakened by the dreadful denunciation of divine wrath, has enough of feeling to convince him that his fellow-men will consider themselves entitled, if not bound, to slay him. And he does not—he dares not—quarrel with the justice of such a proceeding. God, on the other hand, clearly intimates that, but for an express prohibition, the murderer's fear would infallibly and justly have been realised. It is agreeable to the constitution of man's moral frame, and is in itself a righteous thing, that “whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” This law, accordingly, God himself ordained after the flood (chap. ix. 6), not as a part of the Levitical code, which was local and temporary, but as a part of the universal patriarchal religion; a standing law—the one only standing law—of capital punishment, for all ages and for all mankind. It was by a special act of grace that that law was in abeyance in the system which was established before the flood. God himself suspended it, in the exercise of his own sovereign prerogative. But ever since the flood it has been in force; and man has no discretionary right to repeal it.

We read that the latter days before the coming of the Son of man are to resemble the days immediately before the flood (Matt. xxiv. 37). It will be a singular coincidence if men shall then be found proposing to bring back, by their own authority, that suspension of the law in question, which was formerly the act of God himself; if the experiment of exempting even murder from the punishment of death shall be tried again, not with God's sanction, but in man's perverse wilfulness, setting God's prerogative at defiance. The trial was made, then, in the long-suffering patience of God; and miserably was his patience abused. The murderer, in a subsequent generation, imitating Cain's example, gloried in his impunity (ver. 24); and soon the earth was filled with violence (chap. vi. 11). What may not be expected, if the trial shall

be made again, in the mere wantonness of man's intellectual vanity ;—especially if it shall be made when lawless infidelity again, as in the age which the flood surprised, rages against the truth, and against the scanty remnant of its witnesses !

III. But Cain, though thus spared, was made fully and terribly aware of the divine displeasure. He had hitherto been a tiller of the ground ; and the ground, though cursed for man's sake, yielded a return to his toil. This employment of a cultivator of the soil seems originally to have possessed a certain pre-eminence of rank, and it had this manifest advantage that it was a stationary occupation,—a settled line of life. It permitted those engaged in it to remain quietly resident in their hereditary domains, and to exercise their hereditary dominion. Above all, it left them in the neighbourhood of the place where the Lord manifested his presence,—the seat and centre of the old primeval worship. But Cain was henceforth to be debarred from the exercise of his original calling ; at least on the spot where he had previously enjoyed his birth-right privileges. For not only is the ground cursed to him,—he is “cursed from the earth.” It is forbidden to yield to him even the hard-earned return which it may still afford to others : “When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength ; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth” (ver. 12). Thus Cain is compelled to wander. He must abandon the simple and godly manner of life which he might have led, and seek his fortunes abroad,—at a distance from his early home, and from the presence of his father's God. It would seem that he is contented to do so. His anxiety at first, when his sentence was pronounced, arose chiefly from his selfish fear of death at the hands of his justly indignant brethren (ver. 13-15). When that fear is removed, he thinks little of his exclusion from the sanctuary of his God and the society of the faithful. He can still turn to account his natural talents and powers. He goes forth (ver. 16,

17), to live without God in the world,—building cities and begetting children,—himself and his seed prospering and prevailing—until the flood comes—to purge the earth of them all.

Here let us pause and trace the progress of unbelief in the soul. God draws near to sinful men, and proposes terms of free and full reconciliation. He so draws near to me, showing me the way of life. He does not require of me that I should purchase his favour by any oblation. He himself provides the sacrifice ; and he simply asks me to come on the footing of his favour being freely bestowed, and to present the offering of faith, as well as the offering of thanksgiving. But I care not for so close and intimate an intercourse with the Holy One, as is implied in this manner of approach to him. I am willing enough to render to him a certain measure of respectful homage ;—to present as an offering on the altar, such gifts out of my time and talents as I can afford ;—but I see no necessity for anything more. I see, indeed, my neighbour making a far more serious business of his approach to God than I do—and laying far more to heart the whole question of his acceptance with God, and the state of his affections toward God. I see him very anxious and earnest, as one fleeing from wrath, and grasping mercy. And this may be very well for him. But for myself, I see no occasion for any such excitement. I duly go through my customary religious exercises ;—and is not that enough ?

It may happen, however, upon an occasion, that I am not altogether satisfied. My godly brother evidently has the advantage of me. He is better than I can pretend to be—he is happier. He is more at home with his God. There is an air of intense reality about his religion, which puts to shame my somewhat meagre and formal routine of duty. I am displeased and discontented—I am angry, I scarcely know why, or with whom. I have a secret feeling that all is not quite as

it should be between my Maker and myself,—that, in short, there is something wrong in my spiritual state.

Ah ! why do I not give this feeling its full scope and play ? Why do I not come at once to close dealing with my soul, and with my God, and bring the matter promptly to an issue ? If I am right—if I really do well—what have I to fear ? And if I am wrong, if I am the very chief of sinners, have I not a way of peace with God and victory over sin at my very door ?

Alas ! my pride rebels,—I recoil from the humiliation of being a simple debtor to grace. I shrink from that complete union to God and thorough separation from sin which I shrewdly suspect would be the result of a full and fair settlement of the controversy between us. I choose rather to stand aloof, and to compromise the matter by a kind of formal understanding.

Still I am not at ease. I cannot but perceive the vast difference between the mere decency of my devout observances, and the evident heartiness of the man who really has peace in believing and joy in the Holy Ghost. I try to relieve myself, by venting my feelings of irritation against him. I may not indeed slay him—but I find a sort of satisfaction in speaking, or in thinking, ill of him. His high principles offend me ; and I am interested in making him out to be no better than his neighbours. I am not the keeper of his reputation, or of his character—I am not responsible for his unblemished name. If he falls, what is that to me ? Nay, even though the blame should be laid on me, and I should be the cause or occasion of his stumbling,—if I but escape immediate retribution, I can consent that my envious dislike and unjust treatment of God's servant should drive me, as it must practically do, further than ever away from God himself.

Beware, O my soul, of the great sin of Cain. If thy heart is not right with God, thou wilt assuredly be tempted to hate and harass the godly. The spirit of ungodliness is essentially the spirit of murder. It would, if it were possible, annihilate

God,—for he troubles it. The next best expedient is to annihilate all on the earth that reflects his image, and testifies of him. Hence hard thoughts of the truly righteous—suspicions—cruel surmises—evil speaking of their good and exaggeration of their evil—temptations offered to their principles—a silencing and suppressing of their testimony—violence against their persons. Let me take good heed lest the seeds of such dispositions be in me. Let me carefully examine myself. Do I feel any pleasure when the godly man stumbles? Do I join with ready eagerness in the smile raised at his expense? Do I experience relief when I seem to find him less perfect than he once appeared to be?—

If so, let me be awakened in time. Let me be convinced that my real quarrel is not with him, but with his religion and his God. Let me come at once to the question of my own personal standing. I have nothing to do with my brother—I am not his keeper. It may be so. But my own soul is in peril. I have a matter personal to myself to settle. Alone I have to deal with my God. If I am to justify myself, it is not my brother's fall, but my own righteousness, that must save me. But I am poor and miserable. I have nothing that I can present to God for his acceptance.

Then let me end this controversy at once. Let me take the offered Saviour as my own. He is mine, if I will but have him to be mine;—mine without money and without price. I may at once, however unworthy and sinful, with all my guilt on my head, whatever that guilt may be,—on terms altogether gratuitous,—just as I am, appropriate his sacrifice and avail myself of all its efficacy. In so doing, I honour God. Refusing so to do, I make him a liar. Let me no longer resist his Spirit; let me believe his testimony; let me submit to his righteousness, and receive remission, in the only way in which it can be bestowed, through the shedding of blood. Then, instead of seeking to brave out my continuance in sin by means of anger or sullen discontent, I may meekly and

resolutely face the struggle against it and enter into the victory over it which my Lord has won.

Thus shall I taste true blessedness and peace. Yes, even though, instead of any longer persecuting the righteous, I should now be myself persecuted as Abel was. Remembering my own past feelings, I may well expect to be so, and I may well take it patiently;—especially in the view of joining the glorious company in which Abel was the first to be enrolled. “Arrayed in white robes, and having come out of great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,—they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them; God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev. vii. 13-17).

VIII.

THE APOSTATE SEED—THE GODLY SEED—THE
UNIVERSAL CORRUPTION.

GENESIS IV. 16 ; VI. 8.

When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.—ISAIAH lix. 19.

PART FIRST.—THE APOSTATE AND THE GODLY SEEDS.

THE stream of the human family is now found to divide itself into two channels, the one beginning with Cain, and the other with Seth, who came into the place of righteous Abel. Around these two heads, or centres, the growing population of the world began more or less formally to range themselves ; and in their distinctive characters and mutual relations, we trace the progress of the struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

I. It is especially in the line of Cain that the arts of social and civilised life are cultivated. The family of Adam originally settled in a kind of circle near the eastern gate of paradise. Cain removed to a greater distance ; and having now no longer the visible holy place as a centre round which his household might rally, he set himself to find a centre of another kind. He built a city, not so much for security, as for the gratification of his ambition and the aggrandisement of his house (chap. iv. 16, 17). A stranger and pilgrim on the earth, he sought not a heavenly, but an earthly city—desiring to found a race and perpetuate a name. “ He built a city, and

called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch"—a name implying "dedication," or "high destination," applied to Cain's son in impious pride, as afterwards, in a humbler and holier sense, it was fitly given to the patriarch who was translated. It is the same name which is common to both; but while it is a gracious token in the family of the godly, it is a profane usurpation in the household of the murderer.

In the sixth generation from Cain, his descendants are noticed as introducing great improvements and refinements into the system of society. Not only farming and manufactures, but music and poetry flourished among them. In farming, Jabal gave a new form to the occupations of the shepherd and the herdsman; "he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle (ver. 20). In manufactures, Tubal Cain promoted the use of scientific tools, being "the instructor of every artificer in brass and iron" (ver. 22). Jubal, again, excelled in the science of melody, standing at the head of the profession of "such as handle the harp and organ" (ver. 21). And Lamech himself, in his address to his two wives, gives the first specimen on record of primeval poetry, or the art of versification in measured couplets (ver. 23, 24):—

"Adah and Zillah, hear my voice!

Ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech:

For I have slain a man to my wounding,

And (*or even*) a young man to my hurt.

If Cain shall be avenged seven fold,

Truly Lamech, seventy and sevenfold."

Thus, in the apostate race, driven to the use of their utmost natural ingenuity and full of secular ambition, the pomp of cities and the manifold inventions of a flourishing community arose and prospered. They increased in power, wealth, and luxury. In almost all earthly advantages, they attained to a superiority over the more simple and rural family of Seth. And they afford an instance of the high cultivation which a people may often possess who are altogether irreligious and ungodly,

as well as of the progress which they may make in the arts and embellishments of life.

But there are dark spots in the picture. The introduction of polygamy marks the dissolution of manners which began to prevail. "Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah" (ver. 19). And the impunity of which Lamech boasts (ver. 23, 24), shows the violence of a lawless age. He confesses the shedding of blood, and impiously exults in the solemn threatening by which Cain's life had been guarded; claiming for himself tenfold greater security. On what ground he rests his preferable claim does not very clearly appear. Perhaps he may have received provocation: "I have slain a man in retaliation for my wound, even a young man for my hurt"—so many render his song. Or even if, as others think, he had a double murder to answer for, he might still regard his crime as venial in comparison with the fratricide of Cain, and the fierce impiety which prompted it. At all events, he presumed on his exemption from the risk of death.

Thus the race of Cain, abusing the forbearance of God, began to deny his providence and to brave his judgment. And such seems to have been the character of the first apostasy—a natural following out of Cain's sin in refusing the sin-offering and rejecting the humbling doctrine of grace. It was not superstition or idolatry, but presumptuous scepticism. Men said, "God hath forgotten, he hideth his face, he will never see it." Or, "How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the Most High?" (Ps. x. 11; lxxiii. 11). This is very significantly intimated in the book of Job, where there is a description of the irreligion that prevailed before the flood: "Hast thou marked the old way which wicked men have trodden; which were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overthrown with a flood; which said unto God, depart from us: and what can the Almighty do for them?" (Job. xxii. 15-17). The apostate race perverted and abused that

suspension of the righteous sentence of God, which prolonged the days of their father Cain, and even filled his house with good. In the bold spirit of atheistic unbelief, they gave a loose rein to their desire of pleasure and power. Hence, unbridled lust and bloody violence prevailed. Polygamy introduced the one, and the presumption of impunity the other. They became high-handed in vice and crime, and set at nought the prophetic warnings of the coming of the Lord in judgment (Jude 14, 15).

In this view, we have another feature of resemblance between the days before the flood, and the last times when the Lord is to appear. In both, we have an apostasy of the same character—the apostasy of scepticism, and an atheistic denial of Divine Providence, and of the day of retribution. For “there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming?”—men as ignorant and regardless of the judgments of God on the earth, as if he had not come forth to execute vengeance in the judgment of the flood, or were not again to manifest his wrath in the judgment of fire (2 Pet. iii. 3-7).

II. The godly seed was perpetuated in the family of Seth, whose name signifies “appointed, placed, or firmly founded;” for on him now was to rest the hope of the promised Messiah. So God ordained, and so Eve devoutly believed. She no longer clung to Cain, though the first-born; nor did she vainly regret the pious Abel, in whose death she must have received a sad warning and a salutary lesson. She recognised the will of God respecting Seth. “She called his name Seth; for God, said she, hath appointed me another seed, instead of Abel, whom Cain slew” (chap. iv. 25).

The posterity of Seth maintained the cause of religion in the midst of increasing degeneracy. It is true they did not always maintain it very successfully—perhaps they did not always maintain it very consistently. Indeed, as if to remind

us that this was really not to be expected, the historian at the very outset pointedly adverts to the difference between man as he came originally from his Maker's hand, and any race that can now spring from him. He was created "in the likeness of God" (chap. v. 1). A single blessed pair were thus created, that there might be a godly seed (Mal. ii. 15). But, when he had sinned and fallen, "he begat a son in his own likeness" (chap. v. 3). This is surely an assertion of the Psalmist's doctrine: "I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me (Ps. li. 5). And it is given as the explanation of the imperfect and inadequate manner in which now, at the very best, a godly seed can resist and stem the tide of ungodliness upon earth.

Still the race of Seth did testify for God, and in them the Spirit of God raised up a standard against the rushing force of prevalent iniquity. He did so especially in three successive eras of the world before the flood.

In the first place, in the days of Enos, the grandson of Adam, a signal revival took place among those who adhered to the true faith. For this is the import of the expression in the end of the fourth chapter,—whether we adopt the marginal reading of our English version, "then began men to call themselves by the name of the LORD," or, as is on the whole preferable, adhere to that given in the text, "then began men to call upon the name of the LORD" (chap. iv. 26).

The name "Enos," signifying poverty and affliction, seems to intimate the low state into which the cause and people of God had about this time fallen; in consequence perhaps, partly, of the evil example or the violence of the now powerful political confederacy of the house of Cain. In these straits, an urgent appeal is made to God, and a spirit of boldness and union is infused into God's people, to counteract the lawless lust and pride of which the cities of Cain have become the centres. A more marked separation is effected between the followers of Abel's faith and the infidel apostasy. Men are

constrained to assume more distinctively the religious profession, and devote themselves more decidedly to the service of God ; avoiding worldly conformity, and giving themselves more earnestly to prayer as their only refuge. It is a critical season ; a time of revival.

Again, secondly, several generations later, contemporary with Lamech in the house of Cain, lived Enoch in the family of Seth, the seventh from Adam. He was raised up as a remarkable prophet, and the burden of his prophetic strains is preserved to us by the apostle Jude (ver. 14, 15). “And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these” apostates and unstable professors, saying,—

“Behold the Lord cometh,
 With ten thousand of his saints,
 To execute judgment upon all,
 And to convince all that are ungodly among them,
 Of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed.
 And of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have
 spoken against him.”

This true prophecy of Enoch, like the vain-glorious boasting of his contemporary, Lamech, is in the form and spirit of poetry. May not the latter have been a profane mockery of the other? Enoch announces the coming of the Lord in judgment ;—Lamech sets at nought the warning, and presumes insolently on the impunity to be granted to his worst sins,—encouraging himself in polygamy and murder. On the other hand, as set over against Lamech’s insidious poison, Enoch’s solemn warning is a seasonable antidote. In Lamech a new height of daring impiety exhibits itself, and he openly assumes the character of a prophet of infidelity. Enoch again is called to be a witness to the truth ; meeting the infidel in his own line, with a divine poem matched against a ribald song.

But more than that. As the doctrines of the resurrection, the final judgment, and the eternal state, were probably those which a scoffing generation most sedulously corrupted or denied,

so Enoch was appointed to be a witness, in his person as well as by his ministry, to the truth of these vital articles of faith. His translation in the body, by the immediate and, perhaps, visible, hand of God himself—"for God took him" (chap. v. 24)—was a palpable proof of the reality of what he had been commissioned to teach to a gainsaying generation. The LORD, whose advent, as Judge of all, he announced,—of whom he spoke as surely coming to lay hold of the ungodly,—that same Lord came to lay hold of him ; and attested by an unequivocal sign the awful fact, that in the body all must at last meet and stand before their Sovereign Lawgiver and King.

This was the great truth which the men of that day set aside ; and by setting it aside, they emboldened themselves in all iniquity. Believing, or affecting to believe, that the body perished utterly, they deemed it of little or no consequence what they did in the body ; since, if the soul survived at all, it would be in a state into which the deeds of the body could not follow it. This is that "evil communication" of which the apostle speaks, as "corrupting good manners" in his day (1 Cor. xv. 33).^{*} To meet it the servants of God have always preached the doctrine of the resurrection. In the body all shall meet the Lord. This truth Enoch's translation openly attested, not only for the terrible warning of the ungodly, but for the encouragement of believers, who must have found it no easy matter to walk with God, as Enoch did ;—not withdrawing himself into solitary seclusion, but continuing among his fellow-men, the father of a family, and a preacher and prophet of righteousness. Therefore, he was publicly acknowledged as faithful. He received a testimony that he pleased God ; and the signal privilege was conferred on him of exemption from the corruption of death, and immediate entrance, in the body, into the presence of the Lord.

The same, or at least a similar privilege, was afterwards bestowed on Moses. His death on Mount Nebo was, in all

^{*} See this verse explained in "Life in a Risen Saviour."

probability, followed by an almost immediate resurrection. This may be gathered from the mystery of his unknown grave,—from the strife between the archangel and the devil about the disposal of his body,—and from his appearance in the glory of the resurrection state on the Mount of Transfiguration (Deut. xxxiv. 6 ; Jude 9 ; Matt. xvii. 3). The privilege of translation was also granted to the Prophet Elijah. Thus in each of the dispensations, the Patriarchal, the Levitical, and the Prophetical, there is, as it was fitting that there should be, a type and example of what is to be seen at the close of all things, when “the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God.” Then the dead in Christ shall rise first ; and they who are alive and remain shall be caught up,—as Enoch was,—together with the risen saints, to meet the Lord in the air : and so shall they both be ever with the Lord (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17).

Such was the import of Enoch’s translation, to which Paul refers (Heb. xi. 6) as an instance of the power of faith. He takes the recorded fact as a proof that Enoch pleased God, and he argues that Enoch could please God only by believing. “By faith, Enoch was translated that he should not see death.” It must have been by faith, as Paul proves in a formal syllogism. “Before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.” But “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Therefore it follows that Enoch was translated as a believer. The articles of his faith are few and simple enough. The existence of God, and the acceptance in his sight of those that seek him, are the truths believed ; “he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” But, in fact, these are enough, if truly realised by that faith which is the “substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen,” to account for the whole history of a sinner’s conversion and a saint’s walk with God. Let me see God as he is. Let me not merely hear

of him with the hearing of the ear, but let mine eye see him (Job xlii. 5), vividly and brightly, as a present God. And let me, abhorring myself and repenting in dust and ashes, be constrained in downright earnest to ask, What must I do to be saved? Let me then know assuredly that God does reward them that seek him—that he rewards them by being found of them in peace—that I have but to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and I shall be saved. I do believe, the Lord helping mine unbelief. Believing, I walk with God; and in me, as in my Surety, God is well pleased. So Enoch walked, accepted through faith, and waiting for the Lord's coming in judgment. He had present peace with God, and he rejoiced in hope of the glory hereafter to be revealed.

Once more, in the third place, still later in this melancholy period, the Lord raised up Noah; or Nœ, as his name is often written. Either way, the name signifies "comfort" or "consolation;" and certainly at the time the righteous family needed consolation. The delay of salvation and the wide prevalence of evil tried their patience, and embittered all their toil. Nevertheless against hope they continued to believe in hope; and remembering the promise about the seed of the woman, they hailed this new heir of it as the harbinger of better days. In their expectations, they probably dwelt upon the time, when the curse being taken away, the face of the earth would be renewed (Ps. civ. 30); for they said of Noah, interpreting his name as prophetic, "This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord hath cursed" (ver. 28, 29).

Personally, Noah "found grace in the eyes of the Lord." He was accepted; and still it was by faith. "By faith Noah, being warned of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith" (Heb. xi. 7). The proof of his faith was his "preparation of the ark;" it was that which showed his faith to

be real ; his faith about the “ things not seen as yet,” of which he was “ warned by God.” For his faith was influential as well as real ; influential because real. It worked, as was fitting, by fear ; he was “ moved with fear.” He was cautious and provident ; and so he prepared the ark for the saving of his house. But his faith worked also by love—it apprehended and embraced the free grace of the gospel. For, by his conduct in preparing the ark, Noah, renouncing the world, took the Lord alone for his portion. He thus constituted himself the sole ancestor of the promised seed, and served himself “ heir to the righteousness which is by faith.” He abandoned all confidence in the seed after the flesh which was to be destroyed, and consented to rely on the faithfulness of the Lord, by whom the true seed was promised.

Officially, Noah, like his predecessors, was a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. ii. 5). Through him, Christ by his Spirit preached to the spirits in prison (1 Pet. iii. 19)—to those who, while the ark was a-preparing, were shut up as in a prison upon the earth. These Noah warned. He found them “ disobedient,” and doomed to the terrible punishment of disobedience. They were as criminals in the condemned cell, waiting the morning of their execution. There was no door of flight out of the prison in which the Almighty Judge held them under confinement—no possibility of evading the sentence of righteous retribution that awaited them. But one way of escape was provided. A holy man among them was commanded by God to prepare an ark. The long-suffering of God was waiting. The Spirit of Christ was in Noah—the Spirit by which, afterwards when Christ was put to death in the flesh, he was quickened and raised from the grave. By that same Spirit, in the days before the flood, Christ, through the teaching and testimony of his servant Noah, went forth and preached to these miserable spirits of the ungodly, imprisoned on the earth which the flood was to overwhelm.

Thus, in the name and by the Spirit of the Saviour, here-

after to be revealed as dying for men's sins, and rising again for their justification, Noah prayed these sinners to be reconciled to God. And he pointed to the ark as the sacramental seal and pledge, both of the certainty of coming judgment, and of the way of present deliverance. The ark then served the same purpose as the sacrament of baptism now; for baptism is expressly said to be a figure like the ark;—of the same kind with it (1 Pet. iii. 21). It saves believers in the same way; not by itself, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, of which it is the emblem. For the ark figuratively represented Christ as, in his death and rising again, the refuge of those who must otherwise perish. It indicated a salvation, through a penal and judicial death for sin and a blessed and gracious resurrection to eternal life. The invitation to enter into the ark, like the call to submit to the water of baptism, was significant of the sinner's dying virtually and being buried with Christ; and so putting away, not only the filth of the flesh, but also the guilt of conscious sin and the corruption of the old nature. And again, the assurance of his coming forth safely in the ark out of the water was the token of his being raised in Christ to newness of life. In one word, these sinners of the old world were exhorted, as sinners are still commanded everywhere, to repent and to believe. Entering into the ark, they would have been saved by water. Secure within that refuge, they would have gone down amid the raging billows of the flood, only to emerge again in triumph over all its fury. So believers now, shut up into Christ, die with him by participation in all his penal sufferings for sin, only to rise with him to a participation in his righteousness and its reward.

Thus, in three successive eras, the Lord remarkably interposed to arrest the progress of the apostasy. But apart from these occasional interpositions, it is to be kept in mind that the lives and deaths of so many patriarchs were continual testimonies against the sins of the times.

I. It is interesting in this view to consider the longevity of the patriarchs. The length of their days well fitted them for being the depositories of the revealed will of God, preserving and transmitting it from age to age ; and since so many of them survived together, not for years only, but for centuries, they must have formed a holy and reverend company of teachers and witnesses in the world.

The same circumstance, it is true, might tell also on the other side, and give a similar and corresponding advantage to the faction of the ungodly. The long lives of the fathers in the line of Cain, might tend to accelerate the progress of lawless impiety. Hoary patriarchs of infidelity, profligacy, and crime, surviving till the ninth or tenth generation, might lend the sanction of their accursed experience to the schemes of their more adventurous sons and grandsons. Still, upon the whole, the longevity of that ancient race must have proved a benefit to the cause of godliness. In regard to the wicked, not only would the curse of God, and their own violence, contribute to carry many of them off before their days were full—the most eminent in crime being often the earliest cut down ; but even if they were spared, they were as likely to meet for mutual strife among themselves, as for united efforts against the people of the Lord. The godly, again, enjoying the special blessing of Heaven, and having their peaceful days prolonged—honouring also the venerable worthies who could link together years so remote—Adam, sitting with Enoch and Methuselah, and Methuselah in his old age conversing with the men on whom the flood came—might be knit in one common faith and fellowship, and present an unbroken front to the adversary.

So, at least, it should have been. For surely this longevity of the fathers was a boon and privilege to the church. It served, to some extent, the purpose of the written word. It transmitted, not a treacherous and variable tradition passing quickly through many hands, but a sure record of the truth of

God. It was fitted to rally with no uncertain sound—not by the artifice of any dead and nominal uniformity, but on a trustworthy principle of living unity—the whole family of God. If the effect was otherwise—if the testimony of the long-lived fathers then, like the teaching of the abiding word now, failed to keep the sons of God at one among themselves and separate from the world,—their sin was on that account all the greater. The instrumentality was sufficient, being the truth authentically preserved, with as little liability to error or corruption as, in the absence of written documents, could well be guaranteed. Nor was the agency wanting which alone can give a spiritual discernment of the truth. The Spirit was throughout these ages continually “striving with men.” By the Spirit, and through his long-lived servants, Christ was ever preaching to the successive generations of that antediluvian world.

II. But it is not the length of their lives only that is to be taken into account, when we would estimate the effect which the testimony of the godly patriarchs was fitted to have in stemming the torrent of ungodliness. Their deaths also must have been instructive and significant.

There is still something striking even to the most cursory reader, in the perpetual recurrence, throughout this record of protracted life (chap. v.), of the inevitable sentence of death. How often are these brief words repeated, after each long life, “and he died !” How startling is the reiteration of this announcement—how solemn its very uniformity ! Little is told of the sayings, or doings, or sufferings of these men whose days were so long upon the earth. They were men of note in their generations—princes, probably, and priests, as well as patriarchs—taking a lead in civil affairs as well as in the things of God ; but as to all their acts, in whatever spheres they filled, their memory has perished. That at a certain age he had a son, and thereafter lived a certain time, having many children

—this, and no more, is the history of every one of them. And whatever the allotted time of each, and with whatever stirring events filled up, the end of his brief biography is the same yet briefer epitaph—“and he died!”

Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years, and he died. Seth, nine hundred and twelve, and he died. Enos, nine hundred and five, and he died. Cainan, nine hundred and ten, and he died. Mahalaleel, eight hundred and ninety-five, and he died. Jared, living longer than his predecessors, attained the age of nine hundred and sixty-two, and then he died. Methuselah, the oldest of all, was wellnigh within reach of a crowning millennium, but after living nine hundred and sixty-nine years, he died. The son of Methuselah, Noah's father, had almost seen the flood come; but seven hundred and seventy-seven years being meted out to him, he, too, died!

It is the death-watch of that ancient and doomed world—the steady beat, as of a still small sound, striking at intervals upon the ear; marking each footfall of the destroyer, as nearer and nearer, step by step he comes on. At each death of a saint, another hour of the world's day of grace is gone. As of patriarch after patriarch it is announced that he is dead; there is a new alarum rung; and a new call given forth. They depart one by one from the scene; each leaving his dying testimony to a guilty world. And the single exception in the case of Enoch—who has this public token of his having pleased God—that suddenly “he is not, for God has taken him”—speaks even more eloquently than all the rest!

PART SECOND—THE UNIVERSAL CORRUPTION.

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt; they have done abominable works; there is none that doeth good. The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.—PSALM xvi. 1-3.

THE seasons of revival from time to time granted to the people of God, as well as the long lives and successive deaths of the patriarchal fathers, might have been expected to have a wholesome influence on that early world. But the depravity of man was to be proved, and the sovereignty of divine judgment and divine grace was to be manifested.

I. The progress of corruption was not arrested. It increased as the tide of population rolled on.

For a time, the people of God, adhering to the house of Seth, kept themselves unspotted from the world; but even that barrier was at last overthrown. The sons of God, or the righteous, sought alliances by marriage with the families of the ungodly. For "it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose" (chap. vi. 1, 2). They followed their own inclination, without regard to the religious character of the wives whom they chose; a grievous sin, which in every age has marred the religion of many a household, and turned many a fair promise of revival into a season of hopeless declension and apostasy.

To this sad error, the godly seed had previously been tempted by other considerations. There were very plausible reasons for their cultivating a good understanding—at least with the less abandoned of the ungodly faction.

The useful arts and graceful embellishments of social life

began to flourish, as has been seen, in the house of Cain (iv. 19-24). Agriculture, commerce, music, and poetry, were cultivated among his descendants, and brought to a high pitch of perfection. Were the children of Seth to forego the benefit of participating in these improvements and advantages? Were they to deny themselves the profit and pleasure of well-directed industry and well-refined taste? Was it not rather their duty to adopt and prosecute the laudable undertakings set on foot by the enterprise of the world—to rescue them out of the hands of God's enemies, and so make it manifest that religion does not frown on any of the lawful occupations and polite usages of society, but, on the contrary, ennobles and hallows them all?

Then, again, the lawless violence of which Lamech's impious boast of impunity (chap. iv. 23, 24) was a token and example, and which soon became so general as to fill the earth, might seem to warrant, and indeed require, on grounds of policy, some kind of dealing between the persecuted people of God, and the more moderate of their opponents. Amid the distractions which must have prevailed in the ranks of the ungodly, it might seem a point of wisdom and duty that the righteous should avail themselves of any openings which occurred for an alliance with their neighbours, as well as of any advances which these neighbours chose to make to them. Might they not thus lawfully defend themselves with the aid of one portion of the world against another? Might they not combine in a common cause with those who were not altogether at one with them in religion? Nay, might they not thus detach their allies from the world, and by their friendly intercourse win them to God?

Such plausible experiments, in the line of worldly conformity, naturally brought in a third kind of compliance. The intercourse of business almost insensibly led to a closer union in private life. The sons of God and the daughters of men were thrown much together. Other motives than a regard for

the glory of God and the salvation of the soul were allowed to regulate the choice of companions and associates. The godly were "unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Marriages were contracted according to the dictates of policy, or the fondness of passion, and not "in the Lord." It was no longer deemed essential that husband and wife should be "heirs together of the grace of life, that their prayers might not be hindered." The children of God "took them wives of all which they chose," looking more to a fair countenance than to a pious heart. The church and the world intermarried and intermingled. And with what result? There ceased to be a separate and peculiar people, testifying for God and reproofing sin. And ere long a race of giants, powerful and lawless men, overspread the whole earth (chap. vi. 4).

II. At last, the patience of the Lord is represented as worn out. The end of his long-suffering has arrived, and the day of his wrath is at hand. His Spirit having been so long grieved, is to be withdrawn—as if any further contending with man's desperate depravity must needs be unavailing—and judgment is to be executed. "The Lord said, My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh" (chap. vi. 3). He is flesh and flesh only. It is needless to prolong the use of means and opportunities, which only serve to harden his heart, to deepen his guilt and aggravate his doom. He must be suffered to show himself to be what he really is; mere flesh; corruption and carnality.

The decree, indeed, is not instantly executed; the Spirit of God is not suddenly withdrawn. A respite is granted. "Yet," even yet, "his days shall be an hundred and twenty years" (chap. vi. 3). Corrupt as it is, the race is to be spared for a season. But it is only for a season. For the race is incurably corrupt; not Cain's seed only, but Seth's also, is become "flesh;" carnal instead of spiritual, living after the flesh and not after the Spirit (Rom. viii.). It is all ripe and ready for destruction.

Destruction, however, is the Lord's "strange work." He is represented as going about it reluctantly and with regret ; repenting of the very creation of a race on which he is under the righteous necessity of inflicting so terrible a doom. "It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart" (chap. vi. 6).

The expression here employed to describe the Lord's feeling towards the impenitent is in accordance with such language as that of the prophet—"How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together." But there is a peculiarity here, and it is a peculiarity singularly impressive. He repents and grieves, not merely that he is obliged to deal severely with his creatures, but that he has brought them into being at all. It is a bold figure. But, rightly understood, it enhances the tenderness of his compassion, while it aggravates the terror of his certain and inevitable wrath. The Lord speaks as if he would rather the earth had not been created, than that it should thus miserably perish. So the Lord Jesus, denouncing the crime of Judas, emphatically intimates that his having lived at all is a calamity—"Wo unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed. It had been good for that man that he had not been born." What a view does this suggest of the severity of God! What must that wrath be which the Lord so pathetically expresses his reluctance to inflict; and in reference to which he so solemnly declares that it would have been good for the men of that old world that they had never been made, and for the traitor apostle that he had not been born!

Such is now the state of the world, lately so blessed. It is abandoned by the Creator, as unfit for the purposes for which it was created. He who saw every thing that he had made, and behold it was very good (chap. i. 31), now repents, as it were, of his having made the very chiefest and crowning part of all

—man, who was to be his image and glory on the earth. He changes, therefore, his work into a work of desolation. One man alone believes, to the saving of his house, and becomes heir of the righteousness that is by faith. “Noah finds grace in the eyes of the Lord.” And his thus finding grace in the eyes of the Lord is a gracious encouragement to all the faithful in all generations. “For this is as the waters of Noah unto me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee” (Is. liv. 9, 10).

IX.

THE END OF THE OLD WORLD BY WATER—
THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE NEW WORLD RESERVED
UNTO FIRE.

GEN. vi. 9 ; viii. 22 ; 2 Pet. iii. 5-7.

THE demoralisation of the infidel world was now complete ; the corruption had now become universal ; “ God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt ; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth ” (ver. 12). The measure of the world’s iniquity was filled up, and the season of God’s forbearance exhausted. “ The end of all flesh is come before me ” (ver. 13). It is come in a terrible sense and with a terrible significancy.*

The Lord’s resolution is irrevocable ; “ I will destroy them with the earth,” or “ from the earth.” Orders accordingly are given to prepare the ark wherein a few, that is, eight souls, are to be saved : “ Make thee an ark of gopher-wood : rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch ” (ver. 14).

Of the form and size of the ark (ver. 15-21), it is enough to remark that it had the shape of a chest or coffin—or, in other words, of a vessel blunt in the front and stern, and flat below ; and that, as almost all now confess who make the calculation on the common rules of Jewish measurement, it was large enough for the temporary accommodation of the motley crew and cargo that were to occupy it. That due provision was made for their health and comfort, in respect of light, air,

* See Ezekiel vii. 2-6, and Amos viii. 2.

and cleanliness, may surely be assumed, even although in this brief account the particular manner in which this was done is not stated. There were rooms and different storeys, as well as what is called a window, which perhaps was a sloping roof rising a cubit above the sides, and made of some transparent substance.* There were probably also other openings in the sides. There were the means, at all events, of suitably distributing the inmates of the ark, and preserving order and comfort among them.

When Noah received orders to make the ark, the Lord revealed to him the precise manner and extent of the coming judgment. He had before been generally warned ; but now he is more particularly informed ; “Behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven ; and every thing that is in the earth shall die ” (ver. 17).

It was an appalling announcement ; how solemn and how stern ! “ I, even I.” The repetition has in it an awful emphasis and force—“ I, even I.” It is the Lord who speaks, the Creator, the Preserver, now coming forth in wrath as the Destroyer. Thus, elsewhere, he swears by himself : “ As I live, I, even I, am he, and there is no God with me : I kill, and I make alive : I wound and I heal : neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand. For I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, I live for ever ” (Deut. xxxii. 39, 40). So here he confirms his word by an oath, “ I, even I, do bring a flood of waters to destroy all flesh.” And, as his counsel of love, confirmed by an oath in proof of its immutability, imparts strong consolation to the heirs of the promise (Heb. vi.

* The word rendered window, in a subsequent place, when the sending forth of the raven out of the ark is mentioned (chap. viii. 6), is different from that used when it is said, in the orders given for the building of the ark—“ a window shalt thou make to it ” (chap. iv. 1-6). In that other passage, the word may denote a window on the side, while here, in all likelihood, it is the roof that is spoken of.

17), so his purpose of wrath is, in the same way, shown to be unchangeable.

Then, again, as to its extent, how sweeping is the sentence—"I do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, all wherein is the breath of life ; every thing that is in the earth shall die." This heaping up of words is full of terror. Surely there is, there must be an infinite evil in sin—it is indeed exceeding sinful. One single offence opened by a small and solitary chink the flood-gate. The tide rushed in. And now the whole race of man—and not they only, but countless multitudes of unconscious and unoffending living beings made subject to vanity for man's sin—and the very earth itself, cursed at first with thorns and thistles, and now again doubly cursed with desolation on man's account—all are swept along in the impetuous torrent. It might, indeed, seem as if the Lord had forgotten to be gracious—as if in this unbounded and intolerable provocation, his mercy were clean gone for ever (Ps. lxxvii. 8, 9).

It is not so, however. God remembers his covenant : " But with thee will I establish my covenant ; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee " (ver. 18). He is faithful and true ; and though terrible in his righteous vengeance, he keeps covenant and mercy. And he has always some with whom he may establish his covenant ; if not seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal, at least one who finds favour in his sight. His purpose of love according to the election of grace stands sure, and all the unbelief of a world of apostates cannot make it void. The gracious covenant, into which at first, when all seemed lost, he admitted Adam as a partner, he will now again, in this desperate crisis, establish with Noah. And with excellent reason. For it is neither with Adam, nor with Noah, that the covenant is made, else with Adam at the fall, and with Noah at the flood, it must have been for ever ended. What righteousness or what power had either Adam or Noah

in himself to save him from the general wreck and crash of a ruined world, and sustain him erect and fearless before the Righteous One? But the covenant is with his own beloved Son; and with Adam and Noah only in him. Hence it stands sure, being eternal and unchangeable. While the earth is moved, and the mountains shake with the swelling of the seas, the faith which God works by his Spirit in his chosen, enables Noah calmly to lay hold of the promise, that the Seed of the woman shall assuredly, in spite of all, bruise the head of the serpent. In Christ the Son—whose day, even amid the waste of waters, he sees, however dimly, afar off—he may appropriate the Father's covenanted love as his portion; and so doing he may be glad.

Thus God revealed his mind to Noah, when he was to begin the preparation of the ark. And Noah, "warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear," or being wary, proceeded to prepare the ark accordingly "for the saving of his house" (Heb. xi. 7). He believed God. His faith realised future and unseen things, and according as he believed, so he did. "Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he" (ver 22).

How long the ark was a-preparing is not said. But whatever was the date of its commencement, it is evident that it was completed seven days before the flood was to come. At that precise time, Noah received the order to take possession of it;—"And the Lord said unto Noah, Come thou, and all thy house into the ark, for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation. Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female. Of fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female: to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth. For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth" (chap. vii. 1-4).

These directions are more minute than those formerly given ; in particular with reference to the animals. He had previously been told to take them in pairs. Now he is instructed to divide them into two classes, the clean and the unclean. Of the unclean he is to take single pairs ; of the clean he is to take by sevens, three pairs and a half of each kind.

This is plainly not the first appointment of a difference between clean and unclean beasts ; for the distinction is spoken of as familiarly known and recognised. And what was the ground of it ? Not certainly any thing in the nature of the beasts themselves, for we now regard them all indiscriminately as on the same footing, and we have undoubted divine warrant for doing so ; nor any thing in their fitness for being used as food, for animal food was not yet allowed. The distinction could have respect only to the rite of sacrifice. Hence arises another irresistible argument for the divine origin and authority of that rite, and a proof also of the substantial identity of the Patriarchal and the Mosaic institutions. The same standing ordinance of animal sacrifice,—and the same separation of certain sorts of animals as proper for that use,—prevailed in both. The religion, in fact, in its faith and worship, was exactly the same.

Seven days, then, before the tremendous catastrophe, the signal was given to Noah. With all that were to be saved, he was now on board. And “the Lord shut him in” (ver. 16).

In what a position did Noah now find himself ! And in what a position did he leave his contemporaries !

Three successive eras may be noted in the years before the flood ; three trials of the faith of Noah,—three signs and warnings to the world.

When the Lord first fixed the period of his long-suffering patience, and resolved to spare man on the earth for one

hundred and twenty years, and no longer,—he doubtless intimated this purpose in some way; announcing the destruction coming on all flesh, and giving some public pledge of the grace which Noah found in his eyes. This would be a new call to Noah to labour in his vocation of a teacher of righteousness, as well as a loud alarm to the world at large. Noah obeyed the call;—the world set at naught the alarm. To Noah it was indeed a trying office that was assigned,—to testify for God in the midst of such a generation, to whose hatred and jealousy the very token of approbation with which God had honoured him, tended the more to expose him. He became a marked man, the object of scorn and contumely, of injury and insult. The people watched for his halting, and waylaid his path with subtle snares. It was a difficult part he had in these circumstances to perform,—a dangerous duty he had to discharge,—as he walked humbly with his God and went about warning the ungodly.

But the second era was far more critical than the first. The order reaches Noah to prepare the ark, and to gather food for the support of its destined inmates. The predicted judgment now assumes a more distinct form. Not only is it intimated that the world is to be destroyed, but the kind of destruction is specified. There is to be a flood. To a gain-saying and perverse generation, this makes the threatening appear even more improbable than before. Not considering how precariously their earth is poised, “standing out of the water and in the water” (2 Pet. iii. 5),—being wilfully ignorant of the facts of the creation, which doubtless had been revealed,—they laugh to scorn the notion of an overflowing deluge, as a chimera and a dream. They rely securely on nature’s uniformity;—as if the account of the primeval watery chaos and the division of the waters above and under the firmament, were an idle tale;—as if there were no store of rain above and no great deep beneath. Hence Noah, with his endless reiteration and denunciation of terror, seems as

one mad. And when they see him gravely setting to work on his huge unwieldy vessel, and gathering provisions for the motley crowd with which he means to stow her,—what are they to think? Can the man be serious and in earnest? Is it to be endured that he should so flagrantly outrage common sense, and so rudely offend his fellows, by his hoarse prophecy of evil, and the clank of his incessant hammer echoing his ominous and hollow voice of woe?

But now his task is done. One brief week is yet to elapse, and then—

Shall we say it is the eve before the Sabbath? The day has been spent in getting all into the ark,—his wife, his sons, his daughters-in-law, and the whole crowd of living creatures following. Noah himself enters, and “the Lord shuts him in.” Thus the Sabbath begins, the last Sabbath of that old world. Within the ark there is Sabbatic rest, the quiet assurance of faith, chastened by solemn dread and awful expectancy. Without, on the earth, there are mingled sentiments of wonder, contempt, and bitter triumph;—sometimes a lurking fear, again a feeling of glad relief. Men have got rid at last of the preacher of righteousness. And if we assume, as is not improbable, that during this very week the aged Methuselah was taken from the evil to come,—it might seem to be the very jubilee of unrestricted and unreprieved lawlessness that had now arrived.

True, it had been said, “Yet seven days and I will bring the flood.” But how can this be? The heaven is serene; the earth is smiling; all nature is gay and joyous,—it being, as some reckon, the first breaking forth of spring. Now is the season of mirth, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. And Noah, the gloomy censor of the world’s harmless joys, where is he now? Immured in a vast dungeon; buried alive; self-immolated; as good as dead; and at any-rate well out of the way!

What a contrast, during that awful week;—that myster-

ious pause ;—while the elements are gathering their strength for the sudden crash !

Look within the ark. There are prisoners there ; and to the eye of sense, they are apparently shut up to die. But they are prisoners of hope ;—they have fled to a stronghold ;—they have that all around them through which no floods of wrath can penetrate ;—their refuge is “ pitched within and without with pitch ” (chap. vi. 14). It is well protected against the worst weather. And what an emblem is the pitch ;—the very word meaning propitiation or the covering of sins by sacrifice ;—of their complete security from every kind of terror, whether temporal or eternal,—from all risk of perishing either here or hereafter ! They have pitch on all sides of their new dwelling ; pitch-within and without, —pitch, making it effectually a covert from the storm and a hiding-place from the tempest—even such as A MAN is to the sinner,—the man Christ Jesus (Is. xxxii. 2).

Look again without the ark. There are prisoners there, too, “ spirits in prison ; ” condemned criminals, confined in the lowest vaults of that frail fortress on which the waves of wrath are about to burst. Do you see them, these prisoners, all alive and joyous, and affecting to pity the small company buried within the ark ? Do you see them making merry,—or trying, by desperate gambling, to make gain ?

Look once more and listen. There is a lightning flash, a rushing mighty noise. The flood comes.—In which of the two prisons would you have your spirit to be ?

Thus, by the ark which he prepared, Noah “ condemned the world.” The warning which might have saved them, turned to their greater condemnation. But “ he delivered his own soul ” (Ezek. xxxiii. 9) ; and he prepared the ark to “ the saving also of his house ” (Heb. xi. 7).

I pass over the catastrophe itself, without discussing the various questions which have been raised concerning it. The

Apostle Peter, referring to the inspired account of the creation, has given the only explanation we have in scripture of the immediate cause and manner of the flood ;—"By the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water : whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished " (2 Pet. iii. 5, 6). So he connects the two miracles. In creation, the earth arose out of the waters ; they partly retired into the deep places of the earth, and partly were gathered above in vapoury clouds, so as to leave the dry land. Convulsions from beneath, and incessant rain from above, conspired to bring back the waters, so that again they "stood above the mountains" (Ps. civ. 6).

The forty days of unceasing rain are now past, and the work of destruction is accomplished. The flood having risen to its utmost height becomes nearly stationary (ver. 17). These forty days form part of the hundred and fifty,—twice mentioned as the entire time of the flood's duration,—from the first day of rain to the day of the ark's resting on the mountains of Ararat. They were the days of the flood's increase ; during which the ark was lifted up and floated safely on the surface of the rising tide of waters (ver. 18). About the end of the forty days, or perhaps nearer the middle of the hundred and fifty, the ark had reached its highest elevation. In sad and solitary majesty it rode sublime ;—the only moving and living thing over the boundless ocean of death.

It is a time for the exercise of faith. Far down, in the unfathomable depths below, lies a dead and buried world. Noah, shut up in his narrow prison, seems to be abandoned to his fate. He cannot help himself. And in this universal visitation of sin—this terrible reckoning with sinners—why should he obtain mercy ? What is he, that when all else are taken, he should be left ? May he not be righteously suffered

to perish after all? Is he not a sinner, like the rest? Does he not feel himself to be "the chief of sinners?"

But the Lord, who "shut him in," has not forgotten him. With Noah, God has established his covenant; and for his own name's sake his covenant must stand. Therefore the Lord remembers Noah, and in his own good time brings the ship to land. The earth is again prepared for the habitation of man and beast. Once more it emerges out of the water;—never again to perish by the same means.

As the waters gradually subsided, Noah waited patiently where God had placed him; only sending forth, at intervals, as the earliest visitors to the new world, the wandering raven and the domestic dove (chap. viii. 7-12). The raven was the first to find himself at home; amid the remains, it has been supposed, of earth's former tenants. Upon the carcasses lying on the mountains or floating on the waves,—after his long abstinence from such food in the ark,—he might now greedily prey. Sad omen for the still cursed ground! But there is room also for the gentle dove; and there is an emblem of peace which she may bear back to the ark, as the pledge of a better destiny awaiting this world after all.

In the successive intervals of seven days, marked by the sending of these winged messengers, we recognise, as we have had occasion to recognise already, the division of time by weeks. In the earliest worship after the fall, there is probable evidence of the continued observance of the weekly Sabbath. The entrance into the ark is measured by a single week from the beginning of the flood. The incidents that make the subsiding of the flood so interesting, are separated from one another by the same number of days. We can scarcely therefore fairly resist the conclusion that the Sabbath, as dividing time by weeks, was then known as a primitive institution; and that the sanctification of the Sabbath formed a part of the divine service observed even in the ark. On the Sabbath, the dove brings to the weary prisoners of hope

the olive branch, which is to give them assurance of rest (ver. 11). And accordingly Noah, seeing the face of the ground to be dry, after waiting another week, goes forth with his companions, by God's commandment, to resume possession of the earth (verses 13-19).

The patriarch's first business is to erect an altar, and offer sacrifices (ver. 20). Each kind of animal proper for sacrifice successively furnished a victim; for of each kind there was one individual, over and above the three pairs, provided probably for this very end. Thus the new earth was cleansed and consecrated for man's dwelling-place. "The Lord smelled a sweet savour" (ver. 21). He was propitiated, reconciled, well pleased:—having respect, undoubtedly, not to the hecatombs then slain,—the blood of beasts and birds,—but to the more precious blood which theirs prefigured, the better sacrifice of which the new earth was to be the scene. It is that great sacrifice alone which suspends the doom to which the world is otherwise every instant liable. It is in virtue of that sacrifice that God purposes, in his heart, not again to curse the ground any more for man's sake. If the Lord were to act according to man's deserving, there would be no interval, and no end, of his judgments. "The imagination of man's heart being evil from his youth" (ver. 21),—no threatenings, no terrors, no floods of wrath, can purge away his guilt, or change and amend his nature. But where judgment is impotent, grace may prevail. There is to be blood shed which shall cleanse from all sin, and a word of reconciliation preached, effectually to save the chief of sinners. For the shedding of that precious blood,—for the preaching of that blessed word,—the world is to be spared until the end come. There is to be no more any violent shock of nature, or universal destruction of life. The earth is to stand secure during all the remainder of its appointed days; and the seasons are not to cease.

But though its course is to be no more broken in the middle, it is to have a sudden and terrible termination at the last. The judgment of flood is but the type of the still more awful judgment of fire. The earth, saved from water, is reserved for fire. By both elements,—by the baptism both of water and of fire,—it must be purged, before it can be fitted for the habitation of the Lord and his redeemed. Meanwhile, the Lord is preparing a stronghold, an ark of safety. It is the ark of his everlasting covenant, to which all that will believe may flee. In this ark, or in other words, in Christ,—they are now dead and buried; though still they have a hidden life,—a life hid with Christ in God (Col. iii. 3). To the world, they may seem as fond and foolish as did Noah when he entered into his ark, and “the Lord shut him in.” The men of the world, living at ease because all things continue as they were, may marvel and rage, when they see any of us, who once were of the world, moved by a wary fear of coming wrath, seriously betaking ourselves to the only hiding-place. But let us hear the word of the Lord: “Come my people, enter thou into thy chambers,”—the chambers prepared, made ready and set wide open, in the Lord’s ark, which is his Christ, his anointed one,—“enter into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast. For behold, the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth” (Isa. xxvi. 20). And who then may stand? Where shall the ungodly appear? Shut in, imprisoned, with no door of escape, while fire is devouring the earth! But let the Lord hide us now. Let him shut us up into Christ’s blessed gospel of reconciliation:—let him shut us up into Christ himself. Then, although the elements should melt with fervent heat, and this earth and these heavens should be dissolved, we, in Christ, shall be hidden in security, floating in air above the fiery storm (1 Thess. iv.

16, 17). And, finally, as the judgment passes away, an olive branch will be brought to us from the renovated world;— and in the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness, we shall dwell for ever with the Lord, and offer the sacrifices of praise continually.

X.

THE NEW WORLD IN ITS THREE DEPARTMENTS OF
NATURE, PROVIDENCE, AND GRACE.

I. THE LAW OF NATURE (CHAP. IX. 1-7).

Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving ; for it is sanctified by the word of God, and prayer.
—1 TIM. iv. 4, 5.

THE law of nature is the rule which God has appointed for the preservation of life on the earth. It embraces all the arrangements, whether physical or moral, which are necessary for that end. At first that law was very simple. It was materially affected, however, by the fall ; and it was subjected to still further modifications after the flood.

In its original simplicity, the law of nature provided for the increase of the earth's inhabitants, for man's dominion over the other animals, and for the supply of food ; and these three objects it attained by the most suitable and effectual means,—the distinction of the sexes, the native superiority of mind, and the spontaneous fertility of the ground (chap. i. 28-30). The form of expression, in the first announcement of this law at the creation, remarkably corresponds with what is said on the renewal of it after the flood. In both instances it is ushered in by a benediction :—"The Lord blessed them" (chap. i. 28). "The Lord blessed Noah" (chap. ix. 1). Then, having thus generally given his blessing ;—thereby consecrating as his own the law or rule which he is about to institute ;

—the Lord proceeds to lay down more particularly the details of his plan.

The plan is, I repeat, very simple. It provides first for the propagation of life ; and appoints the same rule, in the same terms, for the inferior animals (chap. i. 22) and for man (chap. i. 28), “ Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth.” Afterwards that rule, as applicable to man, is more precisely and particularly explained, and takes the form of the ordinance of marriage (chap. ii. 23, 24). Next, for the protection of life and the safety of the earth’s increasing population, the plan had in it a rule of order and subordination. Man, bearing the image of God, was to reign, as in God’s stead, over all things here below, by the native superiority of intelligent mind, and by the influence of benefits conferred. While he restrained and commanded the creatures, he was to love, protect, and caress them. This was all the government that the yet unfallen world needed—God supreme over man—man supreme over the other animals. Lastly, for the support of life, and the sustenance of earth’s teeming tribes, the Lord appointed the simple food which, as the God of nature, he bounteously furnished. The ground, as yet uncursed, grudged not the supplies which the creatures needed. With unstinted and spontaneous prodigality, the mother earth was to nourish from her own bosom all her children.

After the fall, the law of nature, in all its parts, is very considerably modified. The ordinance of marriage is still holy ; but the sorrow of the woman, greatly multiplied, is the token that, while human life is to be thus propagated, it is not now propagated in innocency, but in hereditary guilt and woe. For the safety and protection of life a new element of government and order is introduced. It is the subordination of the woman to her husband, and the consequent establishment of domestic rule. Law becomes indispensable, and power to enforce law. The husband and father becomes a head and lord. Formerly, the dominion of man over the

creatures sufficed for every purpose of social harmony and security. Now, there must be the dominion of man over his fellows ; and that dominion begins in the family. The husband is the first king. Finally, as to the sustentation of life, the earth now yields her produce reluctantly ; and hard toil becomes the lot of man. The decree goes forth : " In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread."

The law of nature, or of the preservation of life, as renewed after the flood, receives several new modifications. In its first branch, indeed, it is identical with what it was before. Life is to be propagated, and living creatures are to fill the earth ; the mode of increase, in each several kind, remains : and the ordinance of marriage stands in all respects unchanged. But there is a considerable alteration in reference to the second. Man receives a new power over the other animals, and has a new power set up over himself. The power, in both instances, is based on terror : but it is terror necessary and salutary.

Man's dominion over the creatures is henceforward to rest mainly on fear and dread :—" The fear of you, and the dread of you, shall be upon every beast of the earth " (ver. 2, 3). Originally, as it would seem, man's dominion was of a milder character ;—he ruled more by an influence of love ;—a good understanding, as it were, prevailing between him and his harmless subjects. By his kind demeanour, and his erect and noble bearing, he could sufficiently control them. But when sin marred the impress of his mental and moral majesty, and disturbed his friendship with the creatures under his sway—the very familiarity to which they were accustomed may have tended to introduce danger and disorder. His authority, based on love, being shaken—who shall say what part his once willing and obedient subjects may have had, in the violence with which the earth was filled ? Something like that is, perhaps, referred to in this very passage, when God, announcing what is henceforth to be the doom of murder, speaks as if beasts as well as men had been implicated in the antediluvian

bloodshed ;—" Surely your blood of your lives will I require ; at the hand of every beast will I require it," as well as " at the hand of man" (ver. 5). After the flood, at anyrate, man's command over the creatures is not simply restored, but placed on a firmer footing. God inspires them with a dread of man. This instinctive fear has ever since characterised all nature's tribes—not the weak and timid only, but the savage and ferocious also. Occasionally, indeed, it is changed by circumstances into the rage of hunger, or revenge, or despair ; but still it easily regains its habitual sway, and subjects them, in spite of all their strength and cunning, to their appointed master, either as servants or as victims, either to be tamed or to be conquered, to do his work or be put out of his way.

Such is now man's dominion over the creatures ;—a dominion painful in itself and apt to be abused ; bearing but too plain marks of that vanity under which, for man's sin, " the whole creation groaneth and travaileth together." Still, it is in mercy that God has rendered man thus formidable to the other dwellers on this earth. It is no enviable power, when rightly viewed, which he wields ; but, such as it is, it is the gift of God. It is the pledge, moreover, of his great plan of ultimate redemption. That man is still lord of this lower world, in any sense, and under whatever disadvantages, is the result of the covenant of grace and the mediation of Christ (Ps. viii. ; Heb. ii.) And the fact that he is so even now, gives assurance of the day when, in the terms of that covenant, the meek shall inherit the earth and all the creatures shall be at peace (Is. xi. 1-9).

But not only is there new power given to man over the creatures ;—there is new power set up over man himself. The power of the sword is instituted, and it is given into the hand of the magistrate. This is implied in the announcement which God makes of his determination to suppress violence, and to do so by the agency of a human arm :—" At the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso shed-

deth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed : for in the image of God made he man" (ver. 5, 6). Thus, "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. xiii. 1-5). The magistrate has here his divine sanction. For this is not a mere acknowledgment of the instinct of private vengeance, far less a vindication or justification of it. It unquestionably refers to public judicial procedure, and places a high responsible power in the hands of the ruler of the people. For the protection of life, he is to hold the sword ; nor is he to hold it in vain : he is to be a terror to evil doers.

The government which was appointed after the fall, and vested in the husband, or the head of each house or family, bore the character of domestic discipline, or of that mild authority which is exercised in laying down rules for the order of a household, and inflicting occasional correction for the good of its offending members. It had nothing in it of a punitive or penal jurisdiction, properly so called ; and apparently it comprehended no power of life and death. On the contrary, we have seen (chap. iii. 15) that the punishment of death, even for the crime of murder, was suspended, or kept in abeyance, by the express command of God, in the world before the flood. The experiment, as it were, was then tried of subjecting mankind to the least possible amount of coercion and restraint. And, alas ! it miserably failed. "The earth was filled with violence." Now, therefore, a new kind of government is to be introduced ; there must be a sterner rule than the mere discipline of home. Society must be more thoroughly organised and compacted ; law must speak with a more peremptory voice, and power must enforce with a higher hand the sanctions of law. Especially, and by all means, life must be preserved. The sentence of death for death must be recorded, and the sword must be unsparingly used against the murderer.

Such is the divine warrant for capital punishment ; very express and clear, but at the same time very limited. It is indeed true, that this announcement in the verse before us, is

to be understood as virtually embodying the great charter of all civil magistracy, and sanctioning generally the exercise of that kind of power, of which capital punishment is the extreme infliction. It is to this charter doubtless, among others, that the Apostle Paul appeals, when he lays down the Christian doctrine respecting the power of civil rulers and the subjection due to them ; especially when he speaks of them as “ bearing the sword,” and as being “ God’s ministers, to execute wrath, as avengers upon him that doeth evil ” (Rom. xiii. 1-4). But it is to be observed that the case of murder is here very particularly specified, and the case of murder alone, as the only crime for which that particular punishment of death is actually prescribed. The murderer, to the exclusion of all other offenders, is marked out for execution. By fair analogy, this may be held to warrant the visiting of all sorts of offences, not merely with salutary chastisement and corrective discipline, but with penal severities. But this precise kind of severity, the taking away of life, is of such a nature that it can scarcely be extended beyond the explicit declaration of God himself, the only Lord of life. The magistrate may not inflict death on any criminal without the command of God ; but having God’s command, he may not suffer the criminal to live. Here, therefore, we have the divine statute of capital punishments for the world at large,—a statute altogether distinct from the provisions of the Jewish law, in which God, as himself the immediate sovereign of that people, in the exercise of his absolute prerogative, subjected other crimes to the same doom. This original statute remains in force, independently of any special and temporary enactments, as binding upon all governments ordained by God. The murderer must die by the hand of the magistrate, and except the murderer, none else.

This view is confirmed by what precedes, and what follows the ordinance in question.

In what goes before, God intimates his fixed determination to make inquisition for blood (ver. 5). He resolves, as it were,

himself to look more strictly after the commission of this crime, and to see that it shall be visited more promptly than had been the case before. The murderer is no longer to experience so much of his forbearance as in time past ; for life, human life, is very precious in his sight. Even a beast that slays a man is not excused. The violence which filled the old world must be effectually restrained. God, therefore, will not let the murderer go ; he must be taken and unhesitatingly put to death. Such is the divine purpose. And in fulfilment of that purpose, God demands the co-operation of human governments. He himself undertakes, as it were, for the discovery of the murderer ; and then he gives him over to the civil magistrate to be slain.

That is the arrangement which the God of heaven makes with the powers which he has ordained on earth. He fails not in doing his part ; for is it not notorious and proverbial that “murder will out ?” Divine justice, in the dealings of providence, dogs the heels of the shedder of blood, and hunts him down,—until his crime is brought to light, and either some “damning proof,” or confession wrung out of the agony of remorse, discloses the criminal. Woe be to man if he abuses his trust when God has done his part ;—if either not inflicting death at all, or inflicting it too frequently and indiscriminately for crimes of every dye, he makes void that stern and unrelenting ordinance of God, which, isolating from all others this one enormity of bloodshed, devotes and consecrates to it alone, and to it without fail, the doom of the accursed tree,—the malefactor’s death of shame.

In what follows, also, God still further explains and enforces this ordinance, by the reason which he assigns for it. The life of man is to be thus guarded by so terrible a sanction, because God made him in his own image (ver. 6). It is true that the image is marred ; but it is not marred beyond remedy. In every living individual it either is already or may be restored. Therefore every living individual is of inestim-

able value ; and his life, viewed in the light of heaven and eternity, is beyond all calculation important.

How precious, when thus regarded, is man, simply as man ! How undeniable his claim, not only to protection at the hand of his fellows, but to all good offices ! Here is one,—a unit in the mighty mass of this world's crowded throng,—one of many millions. What is he, that his fellows should go out of their way to notice him ? Of what account is he, that all mankind should be obliged to give heed to him ? If he were lost, what matters it ? A single grain of sand on the sea-shore is displaced,—a drop of water from the ocean is amissing. Such is the measure which infidelity would take of man, of the individual man. And so measuring him, what wonder if, instead of avenging slaughter, it slays men by thousands ? What have conquerors, monarchs, and statesmen to do with individuals ? Their movements are on a great scale. Why should they turn aside when I meet them, or pause to raise me when I fall ? This single sentence,—what a change it makes ! “ In the image of God created he man ? ”—this man ;—this particular man ;—myself for instance, or my outcast brother. This is man's indefeasible charter, making the person of the meanest as sacred as any king's ;—challenging for him, be he poor as Lazarus, respect, reverence, regard. Let Christian magistrates and Christian people look to him ;—not merely to require his blood if he be slain ;—but to do him good while he is alive. At anyrate, let them see to it that whoso sheddeth his blood, shall have his own blood shed, in righteous retribution.

There yet remains the third branch of this law of nature to be considered, the provision made for the support of life. In this article, a very important change takes place at the flood ; animal food being then, for the first time, granted for the use of man ;—“ Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you ; even as the green herb have I given you all things ” (ver. 3).

The grant of animal food has a restriction imposed upon it ;—"flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat" (ver. 4). This prohibition was probably intended to guard against certain horrors which prevailed when the earth was filled with violence, as well as to prevent wanton cruelty in slaying animals for food, and ensure that, previously to their being used, they shall not be tortured or mangled, but put to death in the same orderly way as when their life was taken for an atonement for sin.

A similar, but more precise injunction against the eating of blood, was subsequently enacted in the Jewish law ; and it was enforced by the Jews on their Gentile proselytes among some other precepts ascribed by them to Noah, and considered to be binding, apart from their national and ceremonial institutions. These last, it would seem, they did not require all converts from heathenism to observe ; but abstinence from the eating of blood was understood to be binding upon all. This may partly explain the sanction which the Jerusalem Council gave to the rule, in their judgment *on* the question submitted to them by the Gentile Church at Antioch (Acts xv. 29).

How far any such precept is applicable to Christians of subsequent ages, we need not now inquire. The prohibition, in the Levitical code, was undoubtedly connected with the rite of sacrifice ;—the blood being reserved exclusively for the purpose of expiation. That reason will not apply now, when blood is no longer shed for that end. And it is by no means clear that this Noetic rule is the same as that afterwards enacted in the Mosaic ritual. It does not appear to have any religious meaning ; on the contrary, it seems intended merely for the prevention of cannibal ferocity and wanton cruelty. And this view of it is made nearly certain, if we consider the relation which it bears to the general denunciation of blood-shedding. God speaks as the preserver of man and beast ; he gives the beasts into the hands of man, but it is with a limitation of his power over their lives to the strict necessity

of finding food ; just as he gives man into the hands of his fellows, with a corresponding limitation of their power over his life to the single case of murder. If life is to be taken,—the life of a beast or the life of a man,—it must be exclusively for the end which God ordains ; with no aggravation of needless severity, and no accompaniments of rude or wild barbarity.

Such is the law of nature, or economy of life, as appointed by God for the world after the flood. It is, in part, a discipline of severity ; but it is to be viewed chiefly as a provision of mercy. It does not touch any of the endearments or refinements of social intercourse, as based upon the pure and peaceful affections of home. Men are still to dwell in families, and in families they are to fill and occupy the earth. But the dangers to which human society was exposed from the fearless familiarity of the subject animals and the growing anarchy of mere domestic rule, are to be remedied by the dread of man being forced upon the beasts ; and by the sword of magisterial authority being raised in terror against evil doers. And to meet the accumulating difficulty of obtaining supplies from the earth alone, the use of animal food is allowed. Then, to guard against the abuse of these beneficent arrangements, the sword of the magistrate is ordained to be used always for the protection of the life of man, and with a reverential respect to the image of God which man bears. And even the beasts given to man for food are to be the objects of a certain scrupulous care. They are not to furnish a bloody meal. They are to be so treated as to preclude the infliction of needless pain, and prevent any harm which the sanguinary use of them might cause.

How admirable is the wisdom of God, how great his goodness, in ordering the constitution even of a fallen world ! How manifold are the provisions of his care and kindness for alleviating the ills which sin has caused ! Far from leaving

us to spend at random the season of his forbearance, as instinct or passion might blindly prompt,—God establishes a rule or system, whose salutary operation, even those who continue to set at naught its gracious design, are compelled practically to feel. It is that system—based on the principles of holy marriage, of lawful magistracy, and of laborious mastery over the soil that is to be cultivated, and the animals that may be slain, for food,—which alone hinders this globe from becoming a scene such as devils, and none but devils, could delight to witness. It is true that no mere external arrangements can of themselves secure the present or final welfare of any of Noah's children ; and all such arrangements are liable to perversion and abuse. Still, without their due observance, life is but a compound of license, disorder, and precarious subsistence or pining famine ! Purity, peace, and plenty flourish in any community, mainly in proportion as these ordinances are honoured and obeyed. And they place each individual man in the best possible position for escaping, through grace, the corruption that is in the world through lust, and laying hold on the blessed hope of everlasting life, to which, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, believers are begotten again.

XI.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE NEW WORLD, IN ITS
THREE DEPARTMENTS OF NATURE, PROVIDENCE,
AND GRACE.

II. THE SCHEME OF PROVIDENCE (CHAP. IX. 8-17).

For this is as the waters of Noah unto me : for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth ; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee.—ISAIAH liv. 9.

THE scheme of providence, in the world after the flood, is a dispensation of forbearance, subservient to a dispensation of grace, and preparatory to a dispensation of judgment. Of this forbearance, on the part of God, Noah receives a promise and a pledge. The promise is given in the form of a covenant (ver. 9-11), while the pledge, as usual, is a seal of the covenant (ver. 12-17) ; and the covenant thus sealed is the counterpart of the decree or determination previously recorded, in connection with the acceptance of Noah's sacrifice (chap. viii. 21, 22). The purpose which the Lord on that occasion formed, is now openly announced (chap. ix. 8-17). Then, "he said in his heart ;"—now he speaks out, and binds himself by word and sign. It was then a secret intention : now it is a publicly ratified and sealed covenant. To Noah and his sons it is probable that the covenant alone, with its seal, was made public ;—to us, the secret purpose also is disclosed. We are admitted, as it were, into the counsels of God, in order that, interpreting the covenant established with Noah by what we are told of the previous mind of God, we may the better un-

derstand the nature and end, as well as the grounds and reasons of that covenant.

I. Looking, then, to the original purpose, of which we read as existing in the mind of God (chap. viii. 21, 22), his determination to spare the earth is explained on two principles, which it is important to observe. The first of these is the inveterate and desperate depravity of man : " I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake ; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth " (chap. viii. 21).

But how should that be a reason for the exercise of forbearance and long-suffering ? Or are we to adopt the marginal reading—" though," instead of " for,"—and conceive of God as resolving to spare the earth from another flood, not on account of man's corruption, but in spite of it ? It may be so ;—and indeed it matters little which of these two ways of rendering the phrase we prefer. At the same time, there is a peculiar force and significancy in the expression as it stands. " Why should ye be stricken any more ? " is the indignant voice of God to Israel by his servant Isaiah ; " ye will revolt more and more." " The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness at all ; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores " (chap. i. 5, 6). There is no sound part in you on which any chastening stroke can take effect. I will smite no more, for ye are too far gone to be thus reclaimed. So also the Lord says in his heart respecting the world after the flood ;—I will not again curse the earth—I will not again visit it with so desolating a judgment. Why should I ? What good purpose would it serve ? On man, on whom principally it is designed to tell, this kind of treatment can make no impression ; for his nature is too thoroughly depraved. Even the lesson of another flood would be thrown away upon him.

Thus this divine reasoning presents on one side a dark and ominous aspect. But on the other side it reflects a

blessed gleam of light. It indicates the purpose of God, in his treatment of the world during the remainder of its allotted time, not to deal with its inhabitants according to their sins, nor to reward them after their iniquities. His providence is to be conducted, not on the principle of penal or judicial retribution, but on another principle altogether, irrespective of the merits or the works of man. What that is, appears from the relation which the Lord's decree bears to the sacrifices by which he is said to be propitiated (chap. viii. 20, 21). These undoubtedly derive their efficacy from the all-sufficient sacrifice of atonement which they prefigured. And it is that sacrifice which alone satisfactorily explains the Lord's determination to spare the earth. It does so in two ways. In the first place, the interposition of that sacrifice vindicates and justifies the righteous God in passing by the sins of men (Rom. iii. 25),—in exercising forbearance and suspending judgment ; it renders his long-suffering consistent with his justice ;—otherwise, as the righteous judge, he could not spare the guilty for a single hour. But, secondly, that sacrifice of Christ reaches beyond mere forbearance, and is effectual to save. Its direct and proper object is, not merely to provide that the barren tree may be let alone, but to secure that it shall be cultured and revived, so as to become fruitful. Therefore God spares the earth on account of the sacrifice of Christ, that, in the innumerable company of his believing people, Christ may see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied.

Thus the Lord's purpose in regard to the sparing of the earth is explained by these two principles :—the first, negative, that he is not to deal with men according to their works ; the second, positive, that he is to deal with them according to his own grace and mercy, as embodied in the great sacrifice of atonement.

And as by these two principles the Lord's purpose of forbearance is explained and justified, so by them also it is restricted and defined. The first, while securing that the

earth shall not again be visited with any universal retributive infliction, such as the general deluge, involves partial, temporary, and local judgments. These are by no means precluded. For it is of the very essence of a dispensation of forbearance, that while judgment, on the whole, is in suspense and in abeyance, significant hints and tokens of it shall frequently occur. The second again implies a limit to that forbearance. Connected as it is with an atoning sacrifice, it has a distinct purpose, and therefore also a definite period. There is an allotted time during which the earth is to remain ;—it has a certain season of grace. Already God has given one awful proof of the decision with which he inflicts judgment ; and if now he suspends judgment, it cannot be in mere indulgence. But seeing that judgment alone will not reclaim the evil heart of man, and having a plan of grace and reconciliation to accomplish, he grants an interval of respite. Still, it is only an interval, and an interval of limited and fixed extent. For the very provision of present mercy implies coming wrath ; and the days of the earth are numbered.

Such is the decree or purpose of God, for the continued preservation of the earth ; and such is its connection with his acceptance of Noah's sacrifice.

II. In its publication to the human family (chap. ix.), this decree is embodied in the form of a covenant, and ratified by a significant seal.

In the first place, the Lord establishes a covenant on the earth. He might have kept his decree secret. He might have left men to learn from the result what his purpose was ; and they might have lived in continual apprehension of another desolating flood. But he dealt more graciously with them, and condescended to give, not merely an intimation, but an assurance, of his design of mercy. He bound himself by an oath, as he did when he announced the flood : “ I, behold I, establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you ; and with every living creature that is with you ”

(chap. ix. 9-11). Thus it is in the form of a covenant, and with the solemn ratification of an oath, that God intimates his purpose to spare the earth. And what covenant can be meant but only the covenant of grace? That and that alone, is pre-eminently his covenant—"my covenant;"—always the same in its character and terms, whatever may be the kind of salvation meant. In the present instance, it is exemption from the temporal judgment of a flood. But that is secured by the very same covenant in which the higher blessings of life eternal are comprehended. It is God's own covenant,—the covenant of free and sovereign grace, as opposed to any covenant of works, or merit, or express and stimulated condition,—it is that covenant which gives security against another flood;—an irrevocable covenant, standing sure, whatever may be man's doings and deservings, to the very end of earth's numbered days.

Then again, secondly, the covenant, as usual, has a seal or pledge; designed, as it were, to put the Lord in remembrance of his promise, and to settle and confirm the confidence of men:—"This is the token of the covenant: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth" (ver. 12-17). It is not necessary to understand that the rainbow appeared now for the first time; but only that it was now, for the first time, assumed and adopted as a sign of the covenant of forbearance and grace. That end it might fully serve, although it existed before; for it is not any quality or virtue in itself, but the mere word of God alone, which gives to this, or any other token, its significance and force. There is, however, an obvious propriety and beauty in the selection of such a token as this, for such a purpose. From amid the lowering and vapoury clouds, there suddenly emerges the fairest of all nature's sights, the many-coloured arch, spanning the dark earth, and reflecting the beams of the glorious sun. It is God's proof of his faithfulness to the children of men,—the pledge that he is keeping, and will

keep, his covenant. He looks on the bow, that he may remember the covenant. And as the covenant, being made by sacrifice, not only secures a season of forbearance, but contemplates an end infinitely more important; so the rainbow becomes the seal of the covenant in this higher view of it also, —and is the token and pledge of its spiritual and eternal blessings. Hence, among the ensigns and emblems of redeeming glory, the rainbow holds a conspicuous place (Ezek. i. 28; Rev. iv. 3, x. 1); and hence, moreover, the covenant which it seals, gives to God's faithful people an argument of confidence, not for time only, but for eternity. He is true to his covenant, in sparing the world. Will he not much more be true to the same covenant, in saving those for whose sake the world is spared? (Is. liv. 9, 10; Jer. xxxiii. 20-25).

XII.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE NEW WORLD, IN ITS
THREE DEPARTMENTS OF NATURE, PROVIDENCE,
AND GRACE.

III. THE ELECTION OF GRACE (CHAP. IX. 18-29).

Charity rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.—1 COR. XI. 6.

Salvation is of the Jews.—JOHN IV. 22.

THE narrative which closes the history of the flood, introduces the long history of grace contending with nature ; the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, drawing off again to their respective sides. The enmity remains and the warfare is resumed. A single incident is selected to illustrate its recommencement ; an isolated picture is presented to us,—a picture, however, most affecting and full of meaning,—as much so as was the scene which began the struggle in the world before the flood. In either case, it is a domestic scene, a family picture, that is exhibited. In the one case, two brothers,—in the other, a father and his three sons,—open the grand drama of which the wide earth is to be the stage,—and of which the issues are to be eternal. Noah, with Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and perhaps also Canaan, the son of Ham,—such is the little household group, among whom we are to recognise all the features of grace and nature respectively,—of the church and the world,—as they mutually oppose, and at the same time influence, one another. How they usually lived together, is not said ; how they acted on one memorable day,

is all that we are told. But that is enough. It reveals both Satan's malice and the power of the Spirit of God.

Noah is overtaken in a fault ; he " began to be an husband-man, and planted a vineyard, and drank of the wine, and was drunken " (ver. 20, 21). It is an unwonted offence ; the very use which Ham makes of it proves it to be so. But that such a blot should fall, even once only, on the character of such a man, is grief enough, and far more than enough. What can we say ? What can we think ? How could Noah be so left to himself, even in one solitary instance ; and why, when nothing else in the history of his latter days is left on record, should this most painful narrative be preserved ? Alas ! is it not needed ? Has wine ceased to be a mocker ? or strong drink to be raging ? or have men, even wise men, ceased to be deceived thereby ? Are the servants of God,—heirs though they be of the righteousness that is by faith,—preachers of righteousness too,—never tempted now to tarry at the wine—to go to seek the mixed wine ? (Prov. xx. 1, xxiii. 29-32).

But it is the conduct of Ham and Canaan on this sad occasion, that is emphatically stigmatised ; for it would seem that Canaan had some share in the offence committed, as he certainly had a principal share in the doom pronounced. What precisely that offence was, can scarcely be gathered from the narrative ; although we may partly guess its motive. It was obviously an instance of flagrant filial irreverence ; for not even the last degree of unworthiness in a parent will justify the levity or cruelty of a son ; far less a single instance of his being overcome when tempted. But the real explanation of his behaviour must be sought in some deeper motive. Mere wanton disrespect could never, of itself, carry a son so far as he went. Foolish, giddy, wilful as he might be, who that had not some more malignant end to serve, could find his father as Noah was found, and make the discovery a matter of jest or of exultation ? But Ham had another quarrel with his father ; he hated his religion. He not merely dishonoured him as a

parent—he disliked him as a preacher of righteousness. Hence his satisfaction, his irrepressible joy, when he caught the patriarch in such a state of degradation. Ah! he has found that the godly man is no better than his neighbours; he has got behind the scenes; he has made a notable discovery; and now he cannot contain himself. Forth he rushes, all hot and impatient, to publish the news, so welcome to himself! And if he can meet with any of his brethren who have more sympathy with this excessive sanctity than he has, what a relief—what a satisfaction—to cast this choice specimen in their teeth; and so make good his right to triumph over them and their faith ever after.

The temptation presented to them by their younger brother, to join with him in his ribald mockery, the elder sons of Noah resisted; and in doing so, they proved, not only the depth of their filial respect and duty, but the strength also of their religious convictions. They dared to be true and faithful to the cause of God, which they had espoused, in the most trying circumstances in which any man can well be called to maintain it. For how did they deal with the scandal which their unfeeling brother so recklessly exposed? Did they treat it lightly? Did they affect to get rid of it by some plausible excuse? No. They do not give Ham the advantage which he would have had over them, if they had manifested indifference to their father's conduct, or had begun to palliate and defend it. They evidently show that they are alive to the full baseness and guilt of the offence. What they do, is their testimony and protest against the sin;—the manner in which they do it, is the token of their continued attachment to him who has sinned, as well as to the faith which, notwithstanding this sin, they still believe that he truly holds. They treated Noah as one who had grievously fallen; but, at the same time, they treated him as one who, before his fall, had been the upholder and representative of the cause of God, and who would still, by God's grace, be raised again and restored.

And now, when Noah awakes out of his wine, and knows what his younger son has done unto him, what may his feelings be expected to be? If we read the verses in succession without a break or pause,—connecting the curse which Noah pronounced with his awaking to a knowledge of the manner in which he had been treated,—(ver. 24, 25), the narrative would suggest the idea of personal resentment and indignation; and, doubtless, in the circumstances, such an emotion on the part of the father and the patriarch would be both natural and righteous. It is to be observed, however, that no such emotion is ascribed to Noah by the sacred history itself. It is not said that he uttered the prophecy which follows under the impulse of provocation or of passion. And the entire omission of the very name of Ham would seem intended for the very purpose of proving the absence of all personally vindictive feeling.

These two parts, indeed, of this narrative, are to be kept clear and distinct from one another. The fall of Noah is not at all connected with his prophecy; except, perhaps, that it served to bring out the real character of his children, and so to reconcile him to the different destinies which he was to announce as awaiting their respective races. For it would seem that he had not previously discerned with sufficient clearness the antagonist principles of faith and unbelief, of godliness and worldliness, as they were at work in his own household, and were soon to divide the world.

Noah, we are told, awoke; and immediately after, we find that he prophesied. This is all the account given us of his recovery from his grievous fall. But that he was humbled in the dust, as David was in the like case, who can doubt? Of David's repentance, the notice in the history is very nearly as brief as what is here taken of Noah's—it is from the mournful strains of his psalms that we learn the secret experience of his soul. Noah, also, we may be sure, passed through a similar experience. His sin was now ever before him. And certainly

if anything could aggravate his bitter sense of guilt and shame, as he thought of the just offence he had given to his God, it must have been the discovery which he made respecting the conduct of his sons.

That one of them, the youngest, and perhaps the best beloved, should have treated him so rudely, was sufficiently mortifying to his parental feelings; but that was as nothing in comparison with the reflection, that it was his own father who had put a stumbling-block in his way, and proved the guilty cause of the profane outbreak which at last stamped the character and sealed the doom of his child. Nor could he fail to consider the very different conduct of the two elder brethren. To what a trial had he exposed their principles! They had indeed stood the test;—but how little could this have been anticipated; how easily might it have been otherwise! The very reverence and awe, moreover, with which they executed their painful task, must have conveyed to Noah, when made aware of it, a terrible rebuke. Truly it could be no light matter thus to minister to the evil passion of him who sinned, and thus to wound also and lacerate the best principles and affections of those who did so well.

As the incident recorded respecting Noah and his family gives a picture of the church in its beginning, so the prophecy which follows (ver. 25-27) reveals to us the church in its progress. The unequal struggle has commenced again between the church and the world; and ominous enough has the commencement been. The ungodly son has gained an advantage;—the faithful are scandalised and discouraged. But he who “maketh the wrath of man to praise him,” turns the worst actions to account for vindicating his honour and accomplishing his purposes. Thus, in this instance, he interposed to rebuke the proud and raise the lowly; and he did so by the instrumentality of the restored patriarch himself.

Canaan is judicially condemned, and sentenced to a degrading servitude: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (ver. 25). This may be viewed partly as a retributive judgment pronounced on Ham, dooming him to suffer in the tenderest part;—in those very parental affections which, in the case of his father, he had so cruelly mocked and scorned. It may be viewed also as an intimation of what, in the ordinary course of nature, must be the consequence of such sin as Ham had committed, and of such an evil spirit as he had shown. Himself an apostate, his son and his seed are cursed. But in the midst of deserved wrath, God remembers mercy; and, accordingly, the curse is here restricted to his seed in the line of Canaan.*

The punishment to which he is sentenced is servitude or bondage; a double bondage to both his father's brethren. It is thrice specified, and forms, indeed, the melancholy bur-

* There is no warrant for the liberty which some have taken, who have introduced into this prophecy the name of his father Ham, reading "Ham the father of Canaan," instead of simply "Canaan." Their reason for this seems to be, partly, that they think they see in history a wider fulfilment of the prediction than the limitation of it to the race of Canaan would indicate; and partly, also, that in the account given of the offence, the expression "Ham the father of Canaan" occurs (ver. 22). In regard to this last reason, it is far more likely that Ham is called the father of Canaan, from the very circumstance of his sin being avenged, and his seed cursed, in the single line of Canaan; as in a subsequent passage (chap. x. 21) Shem is called "the father of Eber's children," because in that line he was to be blessed. And in regard to the other reason, founded on the apparent signs and tokens of the curse in the history of other nations sprung from the other children of Ham, it may be observed, in the first place, that the prophecy says nothing against their participation in their brother's doom, although it does not expressly foretell it; and further, secondly, that the posterity of Canaan, mixing themselves by dispersion and by colonisation with the other descendants of Ham, may have carried with them, wherever they went, their liability to the curse, and may have involved in it, more or less, the people among whom they happened to settle.

den of this brief prophetic song. For the prophecy is in the form of a poem ; and consists of three stanzas, in which the first line varies, while the last sadly reiterates the same solemn note of woe :—

“ Cursed be Canaan ;

A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.

Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem ;

And Canaan shall be his servant.

God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem ;

And Canaan shall be his servant” (ver. 25-27).

In the first of these couplets, Canaan’s doom is generally announced ;—he is to be a servant of servants. The expression is emphatic. He is to hold a position of peculiarly degraded subjection to both his brethren ; for so the doom is explained in the two following couplets, in the first of which subjection to Shem is specified, and in the second, subjection to Japheth. In addition to the couplet which opens the poem, and is expressly designed for Canaan, it is deemed necessary, in the two other couplets, to repeat the sentence, in the way of contrast or antithesis to the blessings pronounced on the two brothers respectively, who had been found faithful.

In this view, a special reason may be suggested, both for the selection of Canaan as the only one of Ham’s seed who was cursed, and for the repetition of the curse, twice over, in connection with the blessings which Shem and Japheth were severally to receive. It was Canaan who, more than any other of Ham’s descendants, was to come into contact with Shem and Japheth, and to interfere with them in their enjoyment of their privileges. For what were these ?

I. In the case of Shem, the blessing is indirect and reflex ; but on that very account it is the more precious ;—“ Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem.” The prophetic father, beholding afar off the highly-favoured descendants of his highly-honoured son, fixes his devout eye, not on their prosperous and happy state, but on the glory of that great and holy name, with

whose honour their welfare is to be inseparably blended. What prerogative can equal that which this form of salutation implies? I hail as blessed—not my son, but him who condescends to be his God ;—it is not, “blessed be Shem ;” but, “blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem.” Jehovah, the God of Shem, is the blessed One ; how blessed, then, he whose God Jehovah is ! “Blessed is that people whose God is the Lord.” Evidently the blessing refers, in the first instance, to the line of Eber, who is singled out from all the other descendants of Shem (chap. x. 21) ; and ultimately to the family of Abraham, with whom the covenant was established (chap. xii.). But when the time came for the fulfilment of this prediction ; when the race of Shem, in the line of Eber and the family of Abraham, were to inherit the blessing ; when Israel was to possess the Lord’s land and assume his position as the Lord’s people,—who stood in the way? Who but Canaan, by whom the land was preoccupied? “The Canaanites were in the land” (chap. xii. 6 ; Exod. iii. 8, *et passim*).

II. Again, as to Japheth, what is the prophetic announcement? “God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem.” He is to be “enlarged ;”—or, as the word may be rendered, “persuaded ;”—and he is to “dwell in the tents of Shem ;”—to partake of his privileges and be adopted into his communion ;—in a word, to become one with Shem, in respect of that religious blessedness which is implied in Jehovah being his God. For “to dwell in the tents of Shem,” is to have a common lot with the people whose God is the Lord, and amid whose habitations the Lord has his tabernacle. With a view to this, Japheth is to be “enlarged,” or “persuaded.” He is to be “enlarged”—invested with universal empire ; or, he is to be “persuaded,”—plied with influences fitted to open the way for the progress and diffusion of sound doctrine. And this is to be preliminary to his “dwelling in the tents of Shem,” and having the God of Shem, the blessed Jehovah, as his portion.

Who can fail to recognise in this prediction the calling of the Gentiles, who spring from Japheth, and the preparation of the world for the first preaching of the gospel? When the Gentiles were invited to be fellow-heirs with the Jews of the grace of life, Japheth began to dwell in the tents of Shem ; and when, previous to Christ's coming and the preaching of his gospel, the Roman power was peacefully established throughout the whole earth, and amplest means of communication and communion were thus afforded, and men's minds, in all Gentile nations, as well as among the Jews, were hushed into a state of strange expectancy,—then might be recognised that enlargement or persuasion of Japheth, which was foretold as appointed to precede and usher in his dwelling in the tents of Shem.

But it is especially remarkable, that in the course of this enlargement, or persuasion, on the part of Japheth, the main obstruction with which he met arose from Canaan. When Rome was laying the foundation of that wide dominion which, by securing peace, along with free and safe intercourse, through all the world, contributed more than any other external cause, to the early success of the gospel ; her only formidable rival was Carthage, a colony of Tyre, sprung from Sidon, one of the sons of Canaan. Canaan was to stand in the way of Japheth, as well as of Shem ; but his opposition, it was intimated, would be in vain,—his proud race would bend the knee to Japheth as well as to Shem. The conqueror of Rome's armies, himself at last defeated, would be compelled, at Rome's gates, reluctantly to recognise the fortune of Carthage. The curse of Canaan is upon the wealthy Tyrian colony,—while Japheth must continue to be enlarged and persuaded. Rome must reign, that the world may be Christianised.

Such is the meaning of the curse denounced against Canaan, and such its intimate bearing on the blessings which Shem and Japheth severally received. The curse is on Canaan, as representing his descendants generally,—it is upon his race, in their collective character. That multitudes among them might be

individually saved, is quite compatible with this public doom ; the Syrophenician woman, to whom our Lord extended his kindness, furnishes an instance in point. Even in the Jewish dispensation, a Canaanite, after the third generation, might be received into fellowship ; and to all of every race the grace of the gospel is free. But the curse conveys a warning. If God intends to bless any people called by his name, or dwelling in the tents of those who are so called, Canaan may not oppose the Divine purpose with impunity. If he do, it is in vain,—it is at his peril. The mountain is removed and cast into the sea.

The world after the flood is now launched on the stream of time, having received its constitution, in its three departments or kingdoms, of nature, providence, and grace. In the kingdom of nature, wise laws are ordained, conducive to the purity, peace, and prosperity of social life, and to the best interests of each individual soul. In the kingdom of providence, again, a dispensation of forbearance is established, and the Lord waits to be gracious. And, finally, as regards the kingdom of grace itself,—the precarious and perilous standing of the church in an evil world is brought out in the dark commencement of the struggle, whose brighter issue, however, prophecy begins to unfold. That prophecy has already been partially fulfilled ; but the end has not yet come. Jehovah is once more to be blessed as the God of Shem, for he has not cast off Israel ; Japheth, still further enlarged, is to dwell in Shem's tents, when Israel's return shall be to the Gentiles as life from the dead ; and if Canaan is again to offer opposition, it can only be in order that the full meaning of that early curse may be seen, in all its terror, in the latter days.

XIII.

THE EARTH GIVEN TO THE CHILDREN OF MEN, AND
OCCUPIED BY THEM.

GENESIS X. XI.

The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's : but the earth hath he given
to the children of men.—PSALM cxv. 16.

THESE chapters might be expected to throw a flood of light on the geography and chronology of the early history of the world. The tenth is very full and precise in its account of the colonies and settlements into which the first families of Noah's race spread themselves ; while the eleventh is no less exact in marking the periods of the successive generations between Noah and Abraham. Nothing, however, can be more perplexing and embarrassing than the study of these chapters, with a view to these very particulars. Innumerable questions arise respecting the nations and countries described in the one chapter, and the dates indicated in the other ; and innumerable opinions are held on the subjects to which these questions relate, supported by various arguments, upon whose comparative strength we have scarcely the means of deciding.

In regard, indeed, to the geography, something like a general outline may be given, with something like a general consent of interpreters, although the filling in of the details is often little better than matter of conjecture, founded on remote and doubtful analogies of words and names. But the chronology is a more serious stumbling-block to the historical inquirer, who would digest these brief hints of the inspired narrative

into full and formal annals. Not only are there occasional differences among our manuscripts and versions in minor and subordinate points of detail ;—such as slight variations of a few years in some of the incidental dates, in which perfect accuracy might not be material. We have distinct and unequivocal traces in the old copies and translations of this book, of two different modes of computation, varying from one another by whole centuries. And what is worse, the variations seem to be the result, not of accident, but of design, on one side or on the other ; for there are, in fact, two systems, and the difference between them is itself very systematic.

To give an idea of this ;—the dates, both before and after the flood, are determined by the age of each patriarch at the birth of his first son. Thus, before the flood, we have the succession of the patriarchs noted in the fifth chapter ; and we may easily see how a very slight alteration in the reckoning of their years may effect a considerable variation in the entire antediluvian chronology. For instance, Adam, it is said (ver. 3), was 130 years old when he begat Seth ; and he lived after he had begotten Seth 800 years. Add 100 years to Adam's life before the birth of Seth, and take away 100 from his life after that event, you make him 230 when Seth was born, and you allow him only 700 years for the remainder of his life. This leaves his whole life precisely the same, 930 years ;—but it lengthens the chronology, adding 100 years to the time between the creation and the birth of Seth. This is the plan on which the longer chronology is formed ; for the same thing is done with the notices of the other patriarchs. Thus Seth (ver. 6), instead of 105, is made 205 at the birth of Enos, and instead of 807, lives only 707 years after. So also Enos (ver. 9), instead of 90, is made 190 at the birth of Canaan, and lives, not 815, but only 715 years after. And this is done uniformly, except in three instances,—Jared (ver. 18), Methuselah (ver. 25), and Lamech (ver. 28), in each of which there are already, in our copies, 100 years more than

usual assigned to these patriarchs, before the birth of their respective sons.

Such, in general, is the system opposed to that which is found in our present Bibles. And the difference is very much of the same kind in the genealogies after the flood, as these are given in the eleventh chapter ; Arphaxad (ver. 12), being made 135, not 35 years old at the birth of his son ; and so on throughout the list, down to the birth of Abram, Terah, and Nahor (ver. 26).

It is clear that there is an intentional and methodical difference between these two schemes ; but which is the original and true one, it is by no means easy to say. The arguments in favour of the prolonged chronology are drawn both from ancient versions, confirmed by Josephus and some of the fathers, and also from the nature of the case ; the lengthened periods enabling us better to explain the early increase of the earth's population, and the early rise of cities and empires. On the other hand, all the Hebrew copies, which have come down to us, agree in giving the shorter dates ; and unless this very concurrence, which is even more exact than is usual where the Hebrew manuscripts contain numerals or figures, be regarded as itself a suspicious circumstance, it ought to have great weight. It is upon this system that the chronology of our common English Bibles is reckoned ; in regard to which it may be observed, that while it is sufficient for all useful purposes, when we come down to the events of later times, it would be unsafe, to say the least, to accept it as quite certain and trustworthy in the times between the creation and the flood, and between the flood and the calling of Abraham. In fact, so far as the practical benefit of chronology is concerned, which is mainly valuable as it serves to unite and harmonise different streams of history, it matters comparatively little which of the two systems of dates we assign to events which happened while the stream was as yet single and unbroken. If we have a common point of measurement, it is enough ; and

this is furnished by the chronology of our English Bibles, which is that in common use. Nor is there any thing in the doubt in which this unessential question is involved, which should at all shake our reliance on the genuine and authentic character, or on the verbal accuracy and inspiration, of this first book of Moses. It has been handed down to us in many manuscripts and a great variety of versions ; all of which, on the most searching scrutiny and collation, have been found, in every important particular, most thoroughly supporting and corroborating one another.

There are two considerations besides, which may partly reconcile us to our present uncertainty in regard to many of the names and dates which occur in these first chapters of the book of Genesis.

The first is, that they were probably better understood and ascertained once. These things were written for those who lived before us, as well as for us ; and the places and times specified in the history may have been well and certainly known to readers of this book in days of old, when the correct knowledge of them would be of more practical importance than it can possibly be to us now. The other is this,—that they may come again to be better understood and ascertained hereafter. They may have some bearing on the latter days, and may receive new explanations as these days draw near. It is not impossible that this ancient history may be found, before all is done, to have had a prophetic character, or at least to have had a prospective reference to events which prophecy foretells. The prophecies relating to the end of the world have their dates, and their names of places and nations, at least as obscure to us now, as are the delineations and computations of these early chapters of the Bible. The event, as the time of the restitution of all things approaches, will throw light on the dates and names of prophecy ; and it may also throw light on the delineations and computations of Genesis. The map sketched in the tenth chapter may be found useful,

as a chart or plan, when some of the names noted there ;—such as Gomer, Togarmah, Magog, Meshech, Tubal, become again prominent ;—as prophecy seems to intimate that they shall (Ezek. xxxviii., xxxix. ; Rev. xx.) And the chronological genealogies of the eleventh,—confessedly of doubtful interpretation now,—may then help to show on what terms, and according to what arrangement, the Lord, who retains “the heaven, even the heavens, as his own,” hath “given the earth to the children of men ;”—in ideal, from the first, and in full realisation at last.

Thus, as a general principle, it may be observed, that if there are some few things in the Bible which do not appear to be very intelligible or very applicable to us now, they may have served a more useful purpose in time past, and may do so again in time to come. Meanwhile, let us look at the early division of the earth, and the dispersion of mankind ; as to its manner and its results.

I. In regard to the progress of events connected with the occupation of the earth, we may mark four successive steps : 1. The exploits of Nimrod (chap. x. 8) ; 2. The division of the earth in the days of Peleg (x. 25) ; 3. The confusion of tongues at Babel (xi. 1-7) ; and 4. The consequent dispersion of the tribes and families of mankind (xi. 8, 9).

1. Nimrod, who “began to be a mighty one upon the earth” (x. 8), is the third from Noah, being the grandson of Ham, and the son of Cush. Peleg, who was so called, because “in his days the earth was divided” (ver. 25), is the fifth from Noah. It is probable, therefore, that the transaction, whatever it was, from which Peleg received his name, did not take place until Nimrod had at least begun his career, although it is quite possible that it may have occurred very nearly at the same time. The earth, however, must have been as yet undivided when Nimrod entered upon his exploits.

In that view, we may understand the expressions about

Nimrod literally. He was powerful as a hunter of wild beasts ; bent on clearing the fields and forests for the more enlarged habitation of man ;—a lawful, and even laudable undertaking. The increasing numbers of mankind required room and space. They must break through the narrow limits within which they have been confined ; and for this purpose, the lawless tenants of the adjoining territories must be dispossessed. In the bold undertaking, Nimrod leads the way.

2. At this precise stage ;—omitting, in the meantime, what is said of Nimrod's kingdom in the tenth verse ;—I am inclined to bring in the transaction alluded to in the twenty-fifth, respecting the division of the earth. When men were about to emerge from what had hitherto been their home, God interfered to direct them. It was not his purpose, either that they should issue forth in disorder, or that they should follow their own devices in their future settlements. He had a plan of his own for the division of the earth among the families of men ; and it was probably at this crisis that in some way or other he gave intimation of his plan to the dispersing emigrants for whom Nimrod was opening the way.

He did so, as I suppose, by the instrumentality of Eber : “Unto Eber were born two sons : the name of one was Peleg ; for in his days was the earth divided ” (ver. 25). This patriarch, Eber, the fourth from Noah, is specially distinguished in the line of descent from Shem, and of ancestry to Abraham ; for we find Shem called “the father of all the children of Eber ” (ver. 21). He may have been, and probably was, contemporary, or nearly so, with Nimrod.

Thus, at the very time when the swarm, if we may so speak, is about to hive, and is on the wing—when, led by Nimrod, and inspired by him with a new spirit of enterprise, men are bursting the bounds of their former habitation—Eber receives a commission from God to divide the earth among them—to announce to the several tribes and families their appointed homes, and to lay down, as on a map, their different

routes and destinations. This charge he executes, and in memory of so remarkable a transaction, he gives the name of Peleg, signifying "division," to his son, born about the time when it took place. In some such way the earth is allocated, by the command of God, as by a solemn act or deed, to which reference is more than once made in other parts of Scripture. It is of this transaction that Moses speaks in his memorable song, when, expressly appealing to "the days of old," he describes "the Most High as dividing to the nations their inheritance, separating the sons of Adam, and setting the bounds of the people," with an eye, especially, "to the number of the children of Israel" (Deut. xxxii. 8). And Paul, also, preaching at Athens, testifies of God, not merely as having "made of one blood, all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth"—but also as having "determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation" (Acts xvii. 26).

3. The plan of God, however, did not tally with the presumptuous projects of ungodly man. If Nimrod, after clearing, in his character of a mighty hunter, the regions around man's early home, chose to lead forth his fellows on an enterprise of discovery and high daring, were they to be immediately scattered to the four winds, so as to lose the advantage which a compact union gave them? No. They must march in a body as a united band. So the emigrants thought and felt, as they eagerly followed their powerful leader, who himself, by this time, has tasted the cup of ambition ;—which, whoso touches it, must drain to the dregs.

Here, then, we have a vast host or army, journeying "from the east," or "toward the east"—for the expression (chap. xi. 2) is now ambiguous—moving probably along the course of the river Euphrates, eastward and southward, until they come to the vast plain of Shinar, where the famous Babylon afterwards stood. That this expedition, or emigration, is identical with the beginning of Nimrod's kingdom (chap. x. 10), may be certainly concluded from the circumstance, that the same spot is named, in

both cases, as the seat of the enterprise—Babel or Babylon. Hence it is to be presumed that they are aware of the purpose of God respecting the division of the earth. But they cannot acquiesce in it; for it comes across their path, at the very time when they are flushed with the expectation of achieving great things. What to them is the fine scheme concocted by Eber and his godly allies, who make such vain pretences to the favour of heaven? They will take their own way—they will not be so foolish as to disperse themselves, and part company with their valiant captain—they will stand by him and by one another. They are on the look-out, accordingly, for a suitable place to be their centre of union and seat of power—and the plain of Shinar answers their purpose. It is of vast extent, and has most excellent materials for building—bricks as durable as stone, and slime or bitumen, which, on exposure, becomes harder and more tenacious than any mortar. Here, then, is the very spot—here they will build a city and a tower, “whose top is to reach to heaven. Let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (chap. xi. 3, 4).

Such was “the beginning of Nimrod’s kingdom;”—such was the building of Babel. It was an act of daring rebellion against the Most High; and in particular, against his prerogative of dividing to the nations their inheritance; being avowedly intended for the very purpose of preventing the orderly dispersion which God had manifestly appointed. It was, moreover, an act of apostasy from the primitive worship, and the first open avowal of heathenism, or idolatry. The building of the tower “unto heaven,” had undoubtedly a religious meaning. What name they were to make, what gods they intended to worship in connection with the tower,—whether the heavenly bodies, or dead saints, or living heroes such as Nimrod himself,—or all the three combined,—it may be difficult to say. That their scheme was the consummation of their departure from the living God, too plainly appears, both from the spirit in which it was undertaken,

and from the object which it was meant to serve. But "The Lord bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought, and maketh the devices of the people of none effect." So, in the present instance, it proved.

The language used to denote the interference of God in this emergency is very peculiar, and strongly marks the importance of the whole transaction. There is first special notice taken of this enormous wickedness of man, and special inquiry made respecting it ;—"The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded" (chap. xi. 5). Then there is, as it were, deliberation in the counsels of the Godhead ;—"The Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language ; and this they begin to do : and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do" (ver. 6). And thereupon a solemn resolution is accorded ;—"Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (ver. 7). Immediately thereafter comes the swift execution of the decree ;—"The Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth ; and they left off to build the city" (ver. 8). A physical obstacle is interposed in the way of their design. It is not merely a confounding of their plans, but it is so through a confounding of their tongues ;—"The Lord did there confound the language of all the earth : and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth" (ver. 9).

4. Thus the followers of Nimrod and builders of Babel are dispersed. But it is a regular dispersion. The confusion of languages is not what the name of Babel is often improperly used to denote,—a miscellaneous tumult and strife of tongues. It is a divine work, accomplished after the divine manner, decently and in order. He who gave man one language at first, now made, out of that one language, several ; but he did so systematically, and even sparingly. For, as some think that all the varieties of speech now on the earth may

be traced up to three original languages,—it is not improbable that these three alone were spoken at Babel; that being the real extent of the confusion of tongues there effected. Certainly that would be enough to defeat their scheme of union, and to scatter them abroad. Three languages suddenly brought into use instead of one, would effectually serve all the purpose intended. At all events, whatever was the number of radical languages introduced at Babel, it is plain that they were so introduced as to cause, not a confused, but an orderly dispersion; and, in particular, that they corresponded with the differences of race and of family. For, returning again to the tenth chapter, where the families of the sons of Noah, “by whom the nations were divided in the earth after the flood,” are enumerated in detail, we find it expressly stated, of the descendants of Japheth, of Ham, and of Shem, successively, that the division took place “according to their families and their tongues, in their lands, and in their nations” (x. 32). The division of languages, therefore, was made subservient to an orderly distribution of the families of each of Noah’s sons. They were scattered abroad; but it was in a regular manner, and upon a natural principle of arrangement,—with a joint regard to kindred and to language,—according to their families and their tongues.

II. The result of the dispersion, if it were to be minutely examined, would require a very elaborate and intricate discussion. Let a single observation suffice; it is one which, if well followed out, may lead to a clearer understanding of the geography of the tenth chapter, at least in its leading and general features, than ordinary readers are apt to gather from the apparently inextricable catalogue of names.

Let two lines be drawn; the one from the northern, the other from the southern extremity of Palestine; almost due eastward, through central Asia. Between these two lines lies the portion of Shem. Northward of the north line, partly in Asia, partly in Europe, lies the portion of Japheth.

Southward of the south line, partly also in Asia, and partly in Africa, lies the portion of Ham.

Japheth is mentioned first, as being the elder brother. His portion embraces a considerable district or tract of northern Asia,—the original seats of the Medes and Persians, —together with Asia Minor and the adjacent parts of Europe, called by the Jews “the Isles of the Gentiles,” as they gave that name to all lands to which they were wont to go by sea (ver. 2-5). Next comes Ham, whose lot is cast to the south of the Mediterranean sea, both in Asia and in Africa (ver. 6-20). Shem lies between, and is appointed to occupy the fertile regions of which the holy land is the crown (ver. 21-31); an extent of territory nearly corresponding to the grant subsequently made to Abraham. Such generally is the arrangement.

But there are two remarkable exceptions.

The expressions used respecting Nimrod, that “he went forth,” and respecting the families of the Canaanites, that “they were spread abroad,” seem to mark a roving disposition, and a transgression of the allotted limits. And both of them occur in the line of Ham, encroaching on the portion of Shem.

1. Nimrod holds on in his ambitious career, “Out of that land,” namely Babel, in the land of Shinar, “he went forth into Assyria, and builded Nineveh” (chap. x. 11, *marginal reading*). Babel is for a season abandoned,—and no wonder, after the dreadful miracle there witnessed. But in the spirit of lawless ambition, other towns are built. This mighty hunter lays the foundation of two mighty empires; the Assyrian, whose seat is to be Nineveh; and the Babylonian, whose vast metropolis is afterwards to be erected beside the gigantic and unfinished tower of Babel.

Both enterprises are encroachments on the portion of Shem; to whose race has been assigned the plain of Shinar, and indeed the whole of the region watered by the rivers of

Paradise,—the great streams that empty themselves into the Persian Gulf.*

But his ill-omened ambition has had signal mockery put on it by God. For many ages, indeed, the empires thus founded were allowed to flourish; and their founder received divine honours in both his capitals. But long since then they have been swept from the face of the earth; and of the trophies of Nimrod's greatness, the towers and cities which he built, to overtop the heavens and to outlast the world, scarce a vestige remains; except in the monuments only now brought to light—monuments which may well suggest the possibility of the ultimate realisation of the divine plan, in favour of the race of Shem.

2. Another son of Ham intrudes into the lot of Shem, and into that part of it, too, which is most sacredly his, where Jehovah was to be blessed as the God of Shem. It is the spot to which, in his scheme of division, God has special respect (Deut. xxxii. 8, 9). This very corner of Shem's allotted possession we find Canaan quietly preoccupying (ver. 19); not, however, to the frustrating of God's sovereign purpose, but to his own worse ruin when the time comes.

* That this was properly the inheritance of Shem, is inferred from various considerations. Thus, it is believed that the primeval language was preserved in the line of Arphaxad, the son of Shem and ancestor of Abraham; and that his family, accordingly, were appointed to continue in the original seat where Noah, after the flood, had settled. More particularly, the description given (ver. 30) of the region assigned to Shem's posterity, as reaching from Mesha, a mountain in the west of Mesopotamia, to mount Sephar, far eastward, in Susia, including the whole land in question,—and the circumstance of Abraham, when he was called, being found settled on that very spot, in Ur of Chaldea, evidently near the vale of Shinar itself,—make it nearly certain that the countries in which the empires of Babylon and Assyria took their rise, formed part of what was assigned, in the Lord's division of the earth, to Shem; and that Nimrod, therefore, laid the foundation of these empires in acts of unwarrantable aggression on territories which were not his own.

The race of Shem is to wait long before being put in possession of that pleasant region. Years of Egyptian exile and bondage must intervene ; and when at last the land is handed over to Israel, it teems with powerful hosts of foes, such as, in his own strength, he cannot venture to encounter (Numb. xiii. xiv.) But the fault in their original title,—and their subsequent iniquity which was then full,—made the nations of Canaan an easy prey. God himself dispossessed them, that the land, which is his own, rescued from vile pollution and idolatry, might be given to the people whose God is the Lord.

This subject is somewhat speculative ; but it may admit of reflections for practical improvement.

I. How vain and disastrous is it for men to contend against God ! They cannot effectually resist him ; they can only destroy themselves. Especially, if their contention is against any of the plans and arrangements connected with his eternal covenant, how madly do they kick against the pricks ! For a season they may usurp what is his, or his people's. But when their iniquity is full, they must be removed out of the way, in answer to the prayer of faith ; they shall be cut down, or cursed, as cumberers of the ground.

II. How wise is it to acquiesce in God's allotment of good ! and in his manner of bringing his purposes of good to pass. The Lord is the God of Shem. But Shem suffers wrong, and has to exercise long patience before deliverance comes. Still it is enough that Jehovah is his God ; let him not be careful or anxious.

III. As regards the duty and destiny of nations, the purpose of God is here revealed. On the one hand, schemes of conquest, and of concentrated dominion, are not of God. He may make them subservient to his own purposes ; but he will always, in the end, pour contempt on the proud ambition of man. On the other hand—orderly dispersion and wise colonisation are of God ; especially in the line of Japheth. From the first, Japheth was so situated as to have the best facilities and strongest in-

ducements to colonise ; and accordingly, in the early ages, even before he dwelt in the tents of Shem, he was thus enlarged. Colonies from Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, successively over-spread the best portion of the earth ; and by colonies as much as by arms, the way was prepared for the coming of Christ and the calling of the Gentiles. Since that time, Japheth, dwelling in the tents of Shem, has still been undergoing enlargement ;—and what is very remarkable, those branches of Japheth which have most truly dwelt in Shem's tents, have been most in the way of that enlargement. It is from free protestant lands that colonies and missions, carrying Christianity and civilisation with them, have chiefly gone forth. Can we fail to see a connection here,—intimating the purpose of God and our duty and responsibility ? But even if Japheth should prove unfaithful, there is hope for the world still. “Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem ;”—that is still, after all, the rallying watchword by which faith is quickened, and expectation stirred. For “salvation is of the Jews ;” and it is concerning the seed of Shem that the animating question is put,—“If their fall be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles, how much more their fulness ?” (Rom. xi. 12).

Finally, the division of languages, though an obstacle to schemes of human ambition, will not be suffered to be an obstacle to the triumph of the cause of God. Of this, God himself gave a proof and pledge, in the miracle wrought on the day of Pentecost,—the counterpart of the miracle at Babel. The separation of nations will not hinder the unity of the faith. At this very time, the increasing facility of intercourse, the increasing use of our own tongue over vast continents in the East and West, and the familiar mingling of natives of various lands, are rapidly diminishing the difficulties which differences of language occasion. And whether these differences are literally to disappear, or are merely to become innocuous—assuredly, in the end, there shall be one utterance, as well as one heart and one Lord for all.

XIV.

THE CALL OF ABRAM—HIS JUSTIFICATION—THE POWER
OF HIS FAITH, AND ITS INFIRMITY.

GENESIS xi. 27; xii.

Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham.—NEHEMIAH ix. 7, 8.

THE stream of history now flows from a new fountainhead ; as before from Adam, and then from Noah ; so now from Abraham, the father of the faithful, and the friend of God.

The nations descending from Shem, Ham, and Japheth, are in a general way disposed of in the tenth chapter. In the eleventh, one of the lines from Shem is more particularly traced, and is brought down to Terah. He becomes the beginning of a new set of generations, being the ancestor of the race with which almost exclusively the narrative is now connected. By and by, as the thread is drawn out, it becomes more and more slender, as, one by one, successive branches are struck off. Thus, of Terah's sons, Lot and his posterity are soon set aside, and Abraham himself takes the lead ;—from among the children of Abraham, all of whom are noticed as the ancestors of great nations, Isaac is singled out ;—of Isaac's sons, Jacob is preferred ;—and from him the line of Judah is especially traced, and in the line of Judah, the house of David. Thus, by a process, the reverse of what occurs in the flowing of a river, the current of the stream of salvation,—instead of receiving as tributaries,—gives off as superfluous, successive streams

or branches ;—becoming more and more limited as it rolls on, until it ends in the MAN CHRIST JESUS ; from whom again it begins to expand, until at last it covers the whole earth, and sweeps all nations in its mighty tide.

Terah, then, stands forth as the head of the chosen family, in that new section of the history on which we are now entering. “These are the generations of Terah”* (ver. 27). But he

* In adjusting the household of Terah, two difficulties occur. 1. Were his three sons born about the same period of his life, and was Abram the oldest, as he is the first named? So we might at once conclude as we read ;—“Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran” (ver. 27). It is to be observed, however, that Abram’s standing first in the list is no proof that he was the first-born ; any more than Shem’s being mentioned first among Noah’s sons (chap. vi. 10) proves him to have been the senior. On the contrary, as we have reason to conclude that Japheth was the elder brother, so Abram, though named first among Terah’s children, may have been actually the youngest. Then again, although it is said that “Terah lived seventy years and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran” (ver. 26) ;—yet as the meaning obviously must be that his eldest son was born then,—the youngest, if Abram was the youngest, may have been born long after. He may even have been born, as some suppose, sixty years later, when his father was one hundred and thirty years old. This calculation would make Abram seventy-five years old when his father, “Terah, died in Haran” (ver. 32) ; and accordingly, we find (chap. xii. 4) that he was exactly of that age when he left Haran—the first stage of his pilgrimage to which he had removed with his father Terah. The coincidence is conclusive. If we suppose that Abram was born earlier, or in other words, that he was Terah’s eldest son, then it would follow that he must have left his aged parent at Haran to spend sixty years of his declining life there alone. But, 2. another question occurs as to Sarai. Is she the same person with Iscah? Of the three sons of Terah, Haran died young, in the land of his nativity, before the migration (ver. 28) ; leaving two daughters, Milcah and Iscah. Milcah married her uncle Nahor, another of Terah’s sons, the brother of Haran and Abram ; and if Iscah is the same with Sarai, then Abram also, the third son of Terah, married his niece. In that case it would be plain that his brother Haran, whose daughter he married, must have been greatly his senior ; for Abram’s wife, whoever she was, was only ten years younger

soon disappears from the scene : all that is said of him being that he took Abram, his son, and Lot, and Sarai, and went forth with them from Ur to go to Canaan (ver. 31). It might seem, from this manner of intimating it, that the removal of Abram from Ur to Haran was at the instance of his father Terah, since no mention is made of any previous communication from God to Abram. Looking to the narrative by itself, we might conclude that Terah and his family emigrated of their own accord, in their first move at least. But this impression is corrected by what Stephen says in his defence ; “ the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,” or Haran, “ and said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall show thee” (Acts vii. 2, 3). It is to reconcile the Old Testament narrative with what Stephen tells us, that our translators have adopted the expression in the beginning of the twelfth chapter (chap. xii. 1), “ The Lord had said ;” not simply as they might have rendered the phrase—

than himself (chap. xvii. 17) ; and consequently, her father must have been considerably older than her husband. On the other hand (chap. xx. 12), Abram says of Sarai that she was his half-sister ; the daughter of his father, though not the daughter of his mother ; and this would seem to indicate that she could not have been his niece ;—and, therefore, not the same person with Iscah, Haran’s daughter. Still it is possible to reconcile these intimations. For, as it is common in Scripture to apply the term son or daughter to the second and third generation, so Abram’s meaning may be, that Sarai was his father’s granddaughter, of course by a different mother ; in which case, she may still be held to have been the daughter of Haran, and to be the same with Iscah.

These are barren speculations,—somewhat akin, as Luther hints, to the endless discussions about genealogies against which Paul warns Timothy ; and I pass from them with this remark, that as marriage was then necessarily allowed within the degrees afterwards prohibited, so, in the family of Shem, and in the line of Eber, such domestic alliances may have been the rather kept up, as the means of preserving a holy seed, uncontaminated by the surrounding contagion of universal idolatry and crime.

“The Lord said,” but,—throwing back the revelation to a previous part of the narrative,—“The Lord had said.” And, upon the whole, this seems to be the best explanation and adjustment of the two passages. It is not unusual with the sacred writer thus to transpose the order of events. He finishes the subject he has on hand, and then begins a new one with the statement of some circumstance, which, according to its date, might have come in sooner, but has been postponed as bearing more immediately on the second subject than on the first. In the end of the eleventh chapter he is speaking of Terah, and of what happened in his time. Hence he merely mentions that Terah removed his family from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan, and that he came to Haran, where he died ; ascribing the emigration to Terah, as being the head of the house at the time ; and he does not say what occasioned it, until he comes to speak of Abram, who now, after his father’s death, succeeds to the patriarchal principality. Thus we enter on the proper history of Abraham ; and we see him, in this twelfth chapter, in the first place, called out of Chaldea ; secondly, tried in Canaan ; and thirdly, recovered out of Egypt.

I. He is called by the Lord ; and the call is very peremptory, authoritative, and commanding ; it is very painful also,—hard for flesh and blood to obey. But along with the call, there is a very precious promise, a promise of good things manifold and marvellous ;—a great nation ; a great name ; the blessing of God on himself personally, making him a blessing to others ; so intimate a fellowship with God, that all his friends are to be God’s friends, and all his foes are to be God’s foes ; and, above all, the possession of what is to bless all the families of the earth (ver. 2, 3).

Let us picture to ourselves our father Abraham receiving this call and this promise.

1. The whole world around him is lying in wickedness ; as Joshua reminds the Israelites. “Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood,” or the great river, “in old time, even

Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor : and they served other gods " (Josh. xxiv. 2). By this time idolatry had overspread the whole earth. What was its original form, it is extremely difficult to determine. Joshua refers to it as polytheism, or the service of other gods ; Job indicates the worship of the heavenly bodies as common in his day (Job xxxi. 26, 28) ; and in the question which Eliphaz puts—"To which of the saints wilt thou turn?" (Job v. 1)—there is, perhaps, an allusion to another fruitful source of superstition,—the reverence paid to departed worthies, and the notion of their interceding as mediators, or giving help as gods. These two kinds of heathenism indeed,—the worship of dead men and the worship of the hosts of heaven,—are intimately connected with one another ; they both rise out of very natural feelings in the corrupt heart of man, and they are easily harmonised and fitted together. Very probably they began to prevail simultaneously, as parts of the one great system of apostasy which came to a height at Babel. At all events, the earth was now idolatrous. Some few indeed, in different parts of the world, may have withstood the flood of error and maintained the true worship of God ;—as Melchizedek did in Canaan and Job in Arabia. But the declension of mankind generally from the truth was universal ; even Terah's house was not pure ; and Abraham himself is entangled in the world's miserable plight. If he has not become conformed to a world lying in wickedness, he has at least learned to tolerate its wickedness as a matter of necessity, or a matter of course. The old faith has grown lifeless and inert. To live in peace, and make the best of things as they are, would seem to be the part of wisdom.

2. Suddenly, after the silence of generations, the Lord speaks out. Instead of vague and uncertain tradition, his WORD is again on the earth. That LIVING WORD comes to Abram, and like the Lord's appearance to Saul of Tarsus, it takes him by surprise. For when "God chose Abram" (Neh.

ix. 7), it was an act of free and sovereign grace. He did not choose Melchizedek, who was already in the holy land, and was faithfully maintaining there the good cause. The Lord is found of those who seek him not. He comes to Abram, dwelling afar off ; and if not hostile, at least indifferent, to the truth. To him he reveals himself, him he chooses—him he calls. To Abram, while yet ungodly, God, intending “to justify the heathen through faith, preaches the gospel, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (Gal. iii. 8). Such is the Apostle Paul’s inspired commentary on this first call of Abram ; and thus he explains the meaning of the word “blessed,” as it occurs so often in the promise given to the patriarch. The blessedness is that of justification ;—the free, gratuitous justification of the sinner, without any works or righteousness of his own, through faith alone in the appointed and accepted substitute, sacrifice, and surety. That is what the promise gives to the patriarch ; what it conveys to him as the free gift of God ; what it at once and summarily makes him. It makes him “blessed,”—blessed, in the sense of being “justified through faith.” And it makes him henceforth the depository of this gospel blessing,—this free gift of justification through faith,—for all the families of the earth. Abram believed the promise ; and on the faith of it, “when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, he obeyed ; and he went out, not knowing whither he went” (Heb. xi. 8).

3. Such is the calling or conversion of Abraham. What a change does it work in his position, his character, and his destiny ! Before it, what was he ? An obscure and all but solitary man :—married indeed, but childless and hopeless of issue ;—living very much like his neighbours, in an evil world and an evil age. But God has appeared to him—Jehovah, the God of glory ; and the whole course of his life is changed. A word has been spoken to him,—a word of sovereign authority and sovereign grace. He has stood before the Eternal Word.

And what has he learned ? That there is a blessing for him, and through him for others. And what a blessing ! Justification without works, through a perfect righteousness freely imputed,—the righteousness of the Redeemer promised from the beginning,—the Seed of the woman, by whom the serpent's head is to be bruised. Surely he does well to obey such a call, peremptory and painful as it is, when he receives in it such a blessing ! And yet, after all, his believing all this, so unhesitatingly, and so manifestly with all his heart ;—his taking God so simply at his word, asking no questions and raising no difficulties—is a wonder. He might have started objections and made inquiries. How can these things be ? How can he, whose wife is barren, be the father of a great nation ? How can he, a poor sinner, a guilty man, be at once so graciously received into favour ? And how is he to become so awful a sign of trial, and so fruitful a source of good, to his brethren, and to all men ? But he does not stand upon any such scruples. He takes the plain testimony of the God of glory ;—“ I will bless thee ; ”—I, who alone can bless, and whose high prerogative and right to bless none may question ;—I will bless thee. And if I justify, who is he that condemneth ? It is enough. He believes, and is blessed in believing ; blessed,—as having his iniquity forgiven, his transgression covered, his sin imputed no more, and his spirit freed from guile. And being thus blessed himself, he becomes a public and representative man ; all-important issues depend on him. Not only has he a great nation and a great name now pledged to him, but a blessing and a curse are in him. Like the Saviour in whom he believes (Luke ii. 34), he is set for a sign,—a test, or touch-stone, to try the spirits of men, and bring out their enmity against God. Everywhere he will be spoken against ; and speaking against him is braving the wrath of Heaven ;—“ I will curse him that curseth thee.” But many also will rise up and call him blessed ; and these God will bless with the same blessing with which he is blessed himself.

II. In this attitude, and in this character, Abram commences his pilgrimage. He does so amid many trials. (1.) The barrenness of his wife is a stumbling-block in the way of his trust in God, hard to be got over ;—it troubles him often afterwards, and tempts him to grievous and aggravated sin. (2.) He knows not whither he is going. No doubt, it is said (chap. xi. 31) that the company went forth to go into the land of Canaan. But that is the historian's intimation of the end of their journey. They themselves, as the apostle testifies, were ignorant of their destination (Heb. xi. 8, 9). His way, and his final rest, are unknown to the patriarch. Nor does he seek to know them ; he commits all to God. (3.) He breaks many ties of nature, the closest and the dearest. He must leave many beloved friends and kinsmen behind ; and what is worse, he must leave them in the midst of the world's idolatry. Some, indeed, are partakers of his blessing ;—his wife, his father, and his nephew Lot, are with him. But to many whom he would fain have carried with him, when he repeats the call of God, he seems as one that mocks. Already he is “a savour of death unto death,” as well as “of life unto life ;” and hard as it is for flesh and blood, he must consent to abandon many a loved one to his doom,—a doom aggravated by the guilt of rejecting the Gospel invitation, and despising the Gospel grace. (4.) On the way, his little company is still further diminished. His father Terah is removed. This, indeed, is not so great a trial as the former ;—for his father dies in the course of nature, and as we may well believe,—for what else could have moved the old man to go along with his son at all ?—in the faith of the blessing, and in the hope of glory. Still it is a trial ; and coming as it does, so soon after his separation from other friends, and leaving him now with no venerable counsellor to guide him,—with only his beloved wife and his young friend Lot spared to him,—it cannot but be grievously felt. He sorrows not as those that have no hope ; but still he sorrows. (5.) On his reaching Canaan new trials

await him. He is not, as he might have expected, put into immediate possession of the land, or any portion of it. He is told, indeed, that the land will be given to his seed. When he has his second interview with the Lord in the plain of Moreh, he receives that express assurance (chap. xii. 7). But to himself nothing is as yet given;—he is a stranger and pilgrim, wandering from place to place, from Sichem to Moreh, from Moreh to Bethel, pitching his tent at successive stations, as God, for reasons unknown, appoints his temporary abode (ver. 6-9). (6.) And wherever he goes he finds the Canaanites; not congenial society and fellowship, but troops of idolaters (ver. 6). It is, as he may be tempted to complain, from bad to worse with him. In Chaldea it was bad; and he might naturally hope that God was leading him out from among the ungodly, to bring him to the communion of his saints. But in Palestine it is still worse. He does not meet with many Melchizedeks in his wanderings; the Canaanites are everywhere in the land; and under exposure to their profane scoffing and persecution, he has to build his altars to the Lord. (7.) And as if all this were not enough, even daily bread begins to fail him. “There is a famine in the land” (ver. 10); and what now is he to do? He has hitherto been steadfast;—he has “builded an altar” wherever he has dwelt, and has “called on the name of the Lord” (ver. 7, 9). He has at all hazards avowed his faith, and sought to glorify his God. But it seems as if, from very necessity, he must at last abandon the fruitless undertaking. He is literally starved out of the land. Why should he not go back to his old home, and do what good he can? There he would find peace and plenty, and ample room for work. But he is still faithful; and rather than draw back, he will even encounter yet greater dangers. He will go down into Egypt for a time (ver. 10).

Truly “many are the afflictions of the righteous,” and in various points is he wounded, as he passes on through his earthly pilgrimage. Disappointed hope,—ill-requited faith-

fulness and love,—the loss of dear friends,—the delay of promised good,—the uncongenial companionship of the wicked and the worldly, amid whose cold contempt and cruel hatred it is no easy exercise of faith to erect the family altar and make an open avowal of godliness,—the hard and biting pains of destitution and anxiety when bread and water seem to fail,—these are the allotted trials of him who, at God's command, goes forth as a stranger upon earth, seeking a better country. What wonder can it be, if, in such circumstances, his high principle should seem for once to give way, through Satan's subtlety, and his own evil heart of unbelief?

III. In Egypt, accordingly, for a brief space, the picture is reversed, and the fair scene is overclouded. This man of God, being a man still, appears in a new light, or rather in the old light, the light of his old nature. He is tempted, and he falls; consulting his own wisdom, instead of simply relying on his God. He falls through unbelief; and his fall is recorded for our learning, that we may take heed lest we fall. For the temptation, the sin, the danger, and the deliverance, are all such as, in Abram's circumstances, might have befallen us.

1. The temptation was a severe one. Egypt was at this time a flourishing nation; the fertile valley of the Nile supported a considerable population; and the country was already assuming the character which it afterwards bore, as the granary of the world. Its kings, boasting the hereditary name and title of Pharaoh, were wealthy and powerful. They affected the usual oriental state of a large retinue of consorts, and were far from scrupulous as to the means of adding to their number. That Sarai, distinguished by her fair beauty among the dark daughters of Egypt, would at once be coveted for that purpose, Abram seems to have taken for granted. With his limited band of followers, he could not resist any outrage that might be offered; nor would the laws of hospitality protect him. Nay, if she were known to be his wife, the Egyptians might even kill him, that she might be transferred to Pharaoh.

2. In these circumstances, it occurred to the patriarch that she might pass for his sister ;—and so he might not only save his own life, but even do something to preserve her. He would then be in a condition to treat with Pharaoh as to terms of marriage,—and he might hope to prolong the negotiation, till, the famine in Canaan being over, he found means to escape with her out of Egypt. He sinned through unbelief. The falsehood which he put into Sarai's mouth was a grievous sin in itself ; and it was sinful, also, because it indicated, as all falsehood does, the want of a just and reasonable confidence in God. He might have left it to God, in this trial, to make a way of escape, and provide for the safety of the promised seed ; but he “ would be wise ” in himself, and “ it was far from him ” (Prov. vii. 23).

3. His scheme, accordingly, availed him little. He was not indeed killed ; but his wife was at once taken from him, without the ceremony of a previous treaty. She is already in Pharaoh's house ; and though he loads her supposed brother with gifts, apparently that he may win his consent in due form (ver. 16), yet if he will not be satisfied, can it be supposed that the monarch will wait long for that consent, when he has the power in his own hands, and the bride already at his mercy ? Thus Abram's policy overreaches itself.

4. But God, whom he had better have trusted from the first, interferes to deliver him at last ; not dealing with him according to his sin. He averts the evil, and even turns it to account for good. He takes occasion, from this occurrence, to administer a just rebuke to this heathen king, whose lust and violence certainly deserved the chastisement which he received (ver. 17) ; and making known to him, by some special revelation, the cause of the plague which was sent, he teaches Pharaoh to respect Abram as a professor of the true faith, and as plainly enjoying the favour of heaven. At the same time, the very manner of the deliverance is a rebuke to Abram himself. The man of whom he thought so ill has fairly the ad-

vantage of him, both in reproving and in requiting him. The dignified remonstrance of Pharaoh, speaking as one wronged,—and in this particular instance, whatever might be his own sin, he was wronged,—is fitted deeply to humble the patriarch. There is no reason to suspect Pharaoh of insincerity here, as if he were merely pretending to be offended, and affecting a dread he did not feel of the offence he had been so near committing; although even if it were so, still Abram must have stood rebuked before him. And when he saw the king so reasonable now;—nay, when he even learned that if he had been told the truth at first he would have been as reasonable then;—well might the patriarch be ashamed of his unnecessary and unprofitable falsehood,—his weak and wellnigh fatal act of unbelief. Had he trusted God, and dealt justly by Pharaoh, at the beginning, it might have fared better both with him and with his spouse; they might have been spared what must have been to them an interval of intense anxiety; and, as it now appears, an honest testimony might have told even, upon one whom they regarded as beyond the reach of truth and righteousness. Still, as it was, God made the fall of his servant an occasion of good. He glorified himself in the eyes of Pharaoh and his court. A salutary impression was left on the king's mind; and the Lord showed, that, notwithstanding the errors and infirmities of his people, for his own name's sake he would deliver them as “they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people;” that he would “suffer no man to do them wrong,” but would “reprove kings for their sakes” (Ps. cv. 13, 14).

Thus, in the very beginning of Abram's walk of faith, the infirmity of that faith, as well as its power, is practically brought out. And may not this be done for the express purpose of thus early proving,—both that the continued exercise as well as the first production of faith must be the gift of God,—and also that it is not faith itself that really has in it any merit or any efficacy to save, but only that

grace and strength of which faith lays hold? Abram is justified by faith; but the faith by which he is justified is as little to be trusted as any of his other virtues. It cannot, therefore, be on account of its own worth that it justifies or saves, but because, by its very nature, it looks to a worthiness or righteousness beyond itself, and rests on that alone for salvation. It was in the promise of God, and not in his own faith, that Abram trusted; and it was this alone which ensured his recovery from his sad fall; otherwise, when his faith failed, his only ground of safety must have been fairly and finally driven from beneath his feet. But the anchor of his soul was in God. Therefore, though cast down, he was raised up again;—and the salutary lesson which he learned was that of distrust in his own faith as well as his own wisdom, and reliance on the Lord alone. He had been tempted to presume upon his position, as chosen and called by God, and to think that he might himself take measures for averting evil, and securing the fulfilment of the divine promise. He is taught that he must leave all to God, and commit himself, as a little child, entirely to his guidance, who saves his people in a way altogether his own.

But though thus weak when he followed his own wisdom, how strong is Abram in the Lord! In Egypt his eye was not single; he became double-minded, and dealt in guile; and, consequently, he was unstable in his ways (James i. 8). But in his going out from Ur, and in his sojourn in Canaan, how full of light is his whole body,—how steadfast is his loyalty to God,—what trials does he endure,—what temptations does he resist! Surely his faith did work by love; it made him walk at liberty, when he had respect to all God's commandments.

XV.

THE INHERITANCE OF THE LAND PROMISED
TO ABRAM.

GEN. XIII. ; HEB. XI. 8-16.

ON his return from Egypt to Palestine, a new trial awaited the pilgrim father. He returned, indeed, possessed of abundant wealth, for God had greatly prospered him (ver. 2);—but this very prosperity brought a new care along with it. He and his kinsman Lot,—who also had acquired great riches, (ver. 5),—found themselves straitened for room in the land. Their substance consisted chiefly in flocks and herds; and as the previous occupants of the country regarded them with a jealous eye, the two friends could with difficulty obtain accommodation in the same neighbourhood; especially when it would seem that after traversing the land, and moving from place to place, they were disposed to become more stationary (ver. 6). In these circumstances, it was wise and brotherly to part, before the misunderstanding among the servants extended itself to their masters (ver. 7, 8).

Like Paul and Barnabas, the uncle and nephew ended the contention by an amicable separation; and in the parting, Abram manifests at once his faith and his forbearance. He is not careful to choose for himself; but is ready to defer to Lot (ver. 9). Relying on the sure promise of God, and having good hope through grace for the time to come, he can well afford, so far as the scenes and interests of his present pilgrimage are concerned, to act disinterestedly and generously

Nor has he any cause to regret it afterwards. Lot, judging by sight and sense, rather than by faith, is attracted by the beauty and fertility of the plain of the Jordan,—its fruitful gardens and flourishing cities (ver. 10),—without sufficiently taking into account the wickedness of its inhabitants, which has already become notorious (ver. 13). He judges according to the world's judgment, and narrowly escapes the world's doom. Abram, walking by faith, and not anxious about an earthly portion, receives the promise of an eternal inheritance.

Being now left alone at the head of his domestic band, Abram stood in need of special encouragement; and special encouragement was afforded to him. The Lord appears to him, and makes him expressly the heir of the land (ver. 14-17). This is now the third occasion of the Lord's appearing to Abram; but it is the first time we find explicit mention made of what he himself is ultimately to possess. In his first interview with the Lord, before leaving the country of his fathers, he is assured generally (chap. xii. 1-3) of a signal blessing to be enjoyed by him, and to be dispensed through him to others. That blessing, as we have seen, is the Gospel privilege of free justification;—on the faith of which blessing, Abram goes forth a pilgrim to an unknown land. On his arrival in Canaan, he again sees the Lord who has brought him thither (chap. xii. 7), and is briefly told that this land is to be given to his seed. Now, at a third meeting with God, he is favoured with a fuller and more express communication. He is, if we may so say, infested in the land. "Arise," says the Lord, look all around and see the land; "go through it, in the length of it, and in the breadth of it." Take a survey of it;—make a measurement of it;—assume investiture in the lordship of it;—it is thine. "To thee will I give it," as well as to that "seed" of thine which is to be as innumerable as "the dust of the earth."

It can scarcely be doubted that there is something more

here than the promise of the earthly Canaan to Abram's seed after the flesh. Twice the Lord repeats the express personal assurance to Abram individually,—“To thee will I give it.” In the fifteenth verse, indeed, that expression may be held to be qualified and explained by what follows,—“and to thy seed for ever,” which may seem to indicate merely the permanent or perpetual grant of the land to his posterity, as being all that is implied in its being given to himself. But in the seventeenth verse, the expression stands by itself,—“I will give it unto thee;” without mention of his seed at all. Even this, however, may not be acknowledged to be at once decisive; since some may still think that Abram is taught here merely to anticipate the possession of the land by his posterity, as being equivalent to its being possessed by himself. Let us turn, therefore, to the New Testament, always the best commentary on the Old, and inquire if there is any light there which may be reflected back upon this transaction. We shall then see that in all probability something more was intended, and was understood by Abram himself to be intended.

I. In the first place, that the hope of an inheritance for himself, individually, did actually form a part of the faith of Abraham, as also of the faith of Isaac and Jacob, the Apostle Paul most expressly testifies;—“He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God;” and this was “the promise of which he was the heir.” And the same is said of Isaac and Jacob, of Sara, and of all the “strangers and pilgrims” of that olden time (Heb. xi. 10, 13-16). They not merely expected a country and a city for their posterity;—they expected a country and a city for themselves. To prove this, the apostle uses a very strong expression—“Wherefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he hath prepared for them a city” (ver. 16),—as if God would have been ashamed to be called their God,—as if it would have been unworthy of him to assume that title and that relation,—if he had not provided for them,—not for their posterity, but for

them individually,—a country and a city. And what kind of country—what kind of city? A country, with reference to which they shall not have to confess, as they did in those former days with reference to the earthly Canaan, that they are merely strangers and pilgrims in it;—but “a better country, that is an heavenly,”—and a “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Such a city, and such a country, the Apostle Paul distinctly assures us, Abraham looked for and desired, at a time when, as Stephen says (Acts vii. 5), “God gave him none inheritance in Canaan, no, not so much as to set his foot on.” He died in the faith of such a city and such a country being his; “not having received” in actual fulfilment “the promises, but seeing them afar off, and being persuaded of them, and embracing them.”

It is plain, therefore, that Abraham had promises given to him of a country and a city, since he died in the faith of them. But no promises to that effect are on record in the Old Testament, unless we hold such an assurance as that now before us to be one. Nowhere does Abraham receive any promise whatever of future good, or of a future inheritance, for himself, if it be not in the announcement—“I will give thee this land.”

II. Then, secondly, that this announcement does convey such a promise, may be further argued from an expression used by the apostle (Heb. xi. 8), when, speaking of Abraham's call, he says that “he was to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance.” It is to be remarked that the apostle makes no reference, in this whole passage, to Abraham's posterity, as inheriting the land; he speaks throughout of Abraham as an individual. He cannot, therefore, mean that the place in question was one which Abraham was to receive for an inheritance, in a kind of virtual sense merely, and in respect of his seed receiving it. He describes it as a place which, though unknown to him at the time, he should yet himself after receive for an inheritance. And it is on this description of the place into which Abraham was called to go out, as a place

which he was really, afterwards, to possess as his own, that Paul goes on to build what he has to say respecting the patriarch's hope. Upon any other interpretation we can scarcely see how the apostle's reasoning can have any force or meaning at all. Abraham "sojourned," he says, "in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles, as did Isaac and Jacob ;" but it was the land of promise still, and the land of promise to him,—to himself personally. He had been called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance ; and this was that place. He knew and recognised it as such—as the place into which he had been called to go out, and which, therefore, he was hereafter to receive for an inheritance. On this ground alone he had to rest his personal and individual hope for eternity ; this was his warrant for expecting and "looking for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. xi. 8-10).

Thus we learn to connect the promise of a heavenly city and a heavenly country, which Abraham undoubtedly had, with the declaration respecting the place into which he was called to go out, that it was the very place which he should afterwards receive for an inheritance. And with this inspired commentary before us, we can scarcely hesitate to understand the words, "I will give thee this land," as conveying to himself, personally, the promise of a country and a city. ~

III. Still further, in the third place, the apostle's reasoning would lead us to postpone the fulfilment of the promise now in question till after the resurrection. Let us mark well his argument as it bears on this point (Heb. xi. 14-16). Abraham, and all the early pilgrim fathers, confessing that they were "strangers and pilgrims on the earth," still sought "a country" (ver. 14). Nor would any kind of country satisfy them ; for, failing to obtain personal possession of the land of promise, they might have returned to "the country from whence they came out" (ver. 15). This, however, they declined to do ; and their declinature the apostle construes into a proof, not merely that

they acquiesced in the arrangement by which their seed, and not themselves, were to own the earthly Canaan, but that their hearts were set upon an entirely different portion ;—"they desire a better country, that is an heavenly" (ver. 16). Then, following up this exposition of their state of mind upon this subject, the apostle brings in the remarkable inference concerning God to which I have already referred ;—"Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God : for he hath prepared for them a city" (ver. 16). The conclusion thus drawn is most precise and unequivocal. Nothing short of his "having prepared for them a city" could make it suitable on the part of God to take so peculiar a title, or to stand to them in so peculiar and intimate a relation. When he consents so condescendingly to call himself their God, it is because he has some great thing in store for them—something worthy of himself to bestow, something corresponding to so near a connection as is implied in his being their God, and their being his people ;—and what can that be but the "better country, that is the heavenly," which they "desire?" Thus, according to the apostle, the title, "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob," involves a promise of the continuing city, and the better country.

But, according to our Lord, this same title, "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob," involves also a promise of the resurrection ; for in his argument with the Sadducees, he emphatically appeals to it as proving the doctrine of the resurrection : "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. xxii. 31, 32). This reasoning of our Lord, though not at first obvious to a modern reader, is very beautiful and conclusive. It rests upon the use of the present, as opposed to the past tense, in the discovery which God made of himself on the occasion referred to, when he sent his message to the Jews, by Moses (Exod. iii. 6). God at that time announced himself,

not as having been the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob—but as being their God still, at the very time of his making the announcement. He did not say “I was their God while they were on earth,” but “I am their God now.” But what was it that made or constituted him their God while they were on earth? Let the apostle answer. It was “his having prepared for them a city.” It was in respect of this preparation of a city for them that he called himself their God; and he continues to be their God still, even after their departure from earth: “I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.” It is only, however, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as not dead but living, that he is, or can be the God. The promise or preparation of a city, in respect of which alone he assumes that title, was secured to them, not as disembodied spirits, but as living men in the body. If God, therefore, is still their God, even since their removal from this world—and if his being their God is connected with the preparation of a city for them—it plainly follows that God has still a city prepared for them, and that he has it prepared for them, in the view of their being again in precisely the same state in which they were, when first, on this very ground, he “was not ashamed to be called their God.” Otherwise God would not be faithful. They must be identically the same persons, in body as well as in soul, to whom he places himself in this intimate relation. In plain terms, if God once becomes the God of Abraham, then, so long as he continues to be his God, he must have respect to him, as he was when the relation between them was first established. But Abraham was then in the body. It was with Abraham in the body, that God dealt so graciously as not to be ashamed to be called his God. Whatever privilege or promise that relation implies belongs to Abraham in the body, and must have reference to his living again in the body. “God is not the God of the dead.” He never assumed this title, or gave any of its pledges, in relation to the dead, or to disembodied spirits. “He is the God of the

living." It is with the living—with men alive in the body—that he has to do, in all that his being called their God can be held to imply.

Such is the import of our Lord's argument. God not merely was the God of Abraham while he sojourned as a pilgrim on the earth ; he is his God still, ages afterwards. But this cannot mean that he is the God of Abraham's disembodied spirit only, for he never constituted himself the God of Abraham in that sense. It was of Abraham in the body that he condescended to become the God ; it is of Abraham in the body that he is the God still ; and it is to Abraham in the body that he is pledged to make good all that that relation denotes. Abraham therefore must yet live in the body, to receive the fulfilment of the promise which God gave him in the body, and in respect of which, God says, not I was, but "I am, the God of Abraham."

Thus this reasoning of our Lord, to which the Sadducees could make no reply, evidently connects with the title, "God of Abraham," the promise of the resurrection. And Paul, as we have seen, connects with the same title the promise of the inheritance—the country and the city—for which Abraham looked. Plainly, therefore, beyond all doubt, the faith and hope of Abraham had reference to what he was to receive after the resurrection ; and accordingly the promise, "I will give thee this land," must be understood as having reference to the inheritance then to be enjoyed.

On these grounds, we are surely justified in regarding the communication made to Abraham, after his separation from Lot, as conveying to him personally the promise of an eternal inheritance. And there is a special propriety in his receiving such a promise at this particular time. He has already been told (chap. xii. 7) that his seed are to have the land ; and he seems to have made up his mind to be himself a stranger and a pilgrim in it all his days. In the true spirit of one who feels that he is but a stranger and pilgrim, he is ready to defer

to his kinsman Lot in the choice of a dwelling-place. It is comparatively a matter of indifference to him where he sojourns, or how he fares, during the few years of his earthly course. In this land, however it may be with his posterity, he, at least, has no "continuing city." How suitable and seasonable, in such circumstances, to encourage him in seeking "one to come!" He is superior to those temporal and worldly considerations which usually create jealousy and envy, even among brethren. He is quite willing to give the best to his neighbour, and for himself to trust in God. And for what reason? Simply because he sets his affections on things above; because his treasure and his heart are in heaven; because God himself is his portion. Therefore he can afford to sit loose to the possessions of this present world. To one thus situated and thus minded, how little would the promise of a mere temporal and earthly inheritance, to be given to a nation yet to be born of him, seem at all in keeping, or in character, or to the purpose? But the promise of heaven—of the heavenly inheritance, the heavenly rest, the heavenly country, the heavenly city—how congenial, how appropriate, how soothing is it felt to be! Especially must it be so, if he is led to take a high and spiritual view—not only of the blessing promised, as a blessing so great that any temporary possession of a mere tract of ground, by himself or any number of his posterity, could be but a poor figure of it—but also of the persons to whom it is promised, as being, not his natural seed, but the countless multitude of the faithful, of whom he is to be the spiritual father. "To thee, and to thy seed," in this sense, "I will give the land." This, and nothing short of this, is the hope set before Abraham; this is the "recompense of reward" to which he looks forward; not the sojourn of his descendants in Palestine for a thousand years or so before Christ's first coming—nor even their sojourn there again, for some thousand years it may be, whether before or at Christ's second advent—but the resurrection of himself and his spiritual children to glory, and their full enjoyment of the everlasting inheritance of the saints in light.

But there are still two points, connected with this promise, which may seem to require explanation.

I. It may be admitted that it is to this, and other such promises, that the Apostle Paul refers as the ground of Abraham's hope, in looking for a heavenly city. And, indeed, if this is not admitted, there is really no promise of the kind recorded in the Old Testament at all;—a conclusion very improbable;—for how then should Paul, in writing to the Hebrews, refer to this matter so confidently, if it had not a place in their Scriptures? But still it may be asked, how would the language employed by God on this occasion convey such an idea? He speaks of giving to Abraham "this land,"—the identical land in which he is at the time a sojourner. Is it by inference that this is to be understood as indicating, in a figure, the heavenly country, of which the land of Canaan is the type? Or are we to take the words quite literally, and to believe that this very land may actually turn out to be, in part at least, that better country itself?

If any lean to this last interpretation, it may be safely said that there is nothing very strange or improbable in it; nothing that does violence to right views respecting the future world, or the ultimate and eternal habitation of the redeemed. There is nothing unreasonable, or at all inconsistent with Scripture, in the idea that this material earth, itself redeemed and purified, may be fitted, after the great change which it is at last to undergo, for becoming their final and blessed abode. On the contrary, not a few passages in the word of God seem to favour that notion. The 104th Psalm, for instance, holds out some such prospect of the earth being renewed; and the 37th Psalm, in several of its promises, may be most simply and suitably explained, according to the letter, on this same principle (ver. 11, 22, etc.); the precise recompense promised to the righteous and the meek being over and over again said to be their inheriting the earth on which now they suffer wrong. This, also, is consistent with what Job says of the resurrection

to which he looked forward (chap. xix. 25, 26). And, once more, the final judgment of fire is compared (2 Pet. iii.) to the judgment of the flood, from which the earth emerged, anew prepared for man's habitation ; and so, accordingly, we read of there being new heavens and a new earth,—the earth still subsisting, only purified by fire and made new. Other expressions, no doubt, may be cited, which at first sight may seem to be at variance with this view ; but these, on a closer inspection, will generally be found to be irrelevant and indecisive as to the real question at issue. Certainly there is nothing contrary to analogy or to sound doctrine in the opinion, that the risen and glorified saints of God are finally to occupy this planet of ours—this spot, which of all creation is become the most remarkable,—“ the holy fields,

“ Over whose acres walked those blessed feet,
Which eighteen hundred years ago were nailed,
For our advantage, on the bitter cross.”

According to this view, respecting the ultimate seat of the heavenly blessedness, it is easy to see how Abraham might understand the promise, “ To thee will I give the land.” Having been previously told that it was to be given to his seed, exclusive of himself, and now learning that it is to be given specially to himself and his seed, how can he reconcile these intimations ? How but by concluding that they refer to two distinct eras,—the one, to the life that now is, the other, to that which is to come ? In the present life, his natural posterity are to possess the land ; in the future life, “ in the regeneration,” or “ in the resurrection,” he himself, and his spiritual seed, are to occupy it. The soil which then he trode as a stranger, and where, almost by mere sufferance, his bones were to be allowed to lie, is to be part, and possibly the chief part, of the new earth, in which righteousness is to dwell ; and he and all the faithful, raised in glory, are to find there “ the better, that is the heavenly country ” which they “ desired,”

and the "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

II. Another observation remains to be made. The apostolic commentary, on which we have built so much, cannot possibly refer to any thing short of the final and eternal inheritance of glory. The heaven which Abraham looked for, may, as to its site, be on earth; but at all events, it was what we mean by heaven that he did look for—the final and eternal state of the risen saints of God. For, mark again the apostle's argument. The whole force of it depends on the contrast which he draws between what was Abraham's condition when he got the promise and what is to be his condition when he gets the fulfilment of it. When he dwelt in the land, he confessed that he was a stranger and pilgrim on the earth; so also did his sons, Isaac and Jacob. Their descendants, too, the Israelites, when they came to inhabit Canaan, bore the same character (Ps. xxxix. 12; Lev. xxv. 23); the land was God's; they were but strangers and pilgrims in it. Even if they come to be again restored, and possess the land on the footing of that better covenant, which Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem to announce,—on the footing of a free forgiveness, and the free gift of the Spirit (Jer. xxxi. 31-34; Ezek. xi. 19, 20)—still, if it is on this side of the general conflagration, their tenure of it will be but temporary. Nay, were the saints themselves, the patriarchs, and prophets, and martyrs, to be raised before the end of all things, and to dwell again in the land;—after all, if any change yet awaited the earth, they would be strangers and pilgrims still. But, according to the apostle, what Abraham looked forward to was a state of eternal and enduring rest, a continuing city, as opposed to a condition of pilgrimage or temporary sojourn. And this can be nothing else than the heavenly inheritance, wherever placed,—the final gift of God to his redeemed, and the final fixing of their blessed lot.

Such is the hope set before Abraham. And now, to close this discussion, let the following remarks be weighed.

I. Some may think, that although we may gather all that we have been endeavouring to establish out of such a promise as that before us, it might not suggest so much to Abraham himself. The reverse rather is probable. It is to be remembered always, that the communications made by God to the patriarchs were not the beginning of his revelation; they all proceed upon previous discoveries. Hence much is taken for granted as already known; the knowledge of it needing only to be revived, corrected, and enlarged. The great leading truths of religion,—the being of God, the manner of his existence, the plan of salvation, the efficacy of sacrifice, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting,—these, having been made known from the beginning, are rather assumed than expressly taught in the subsequent intercourse of God with man. Hence, in all probability the patriarchs, with their previous knowledge and the views already familiar to them, would have a better apprehension of the full meaning of what God said to them, than, but for the New Testament commentary, we could have. In fact, the clear discoveries of the New Testament may substantially serve to us this very purpose of placing us more nearly in the same position in which the patriarchs were when the successive communications of the divine will reached them, and so enabling us to understand these communications more nearly as they would do. The idea of a resurrection and of a heavenly inheritance was not new to Abraham: it formed a part of the primeval religion which, amid all its corruptions, might still survive so far as to suggest the light in which he should regard this new promise. And above all, let it be considered that the Spirit who searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God, was as free to give a spiritual discernment of these things to the holy patriarch himself, as to any prophets, or apostles, or saints of all succeeding generations.

II. But further, however this may be, and whatever may be thought of the argument we have been pursuing, let it be carefully observed, that the main and all-important fact concerning Abraham's hope, rests, not on any reasoning of ours, but on the explicit testimony of an inspired apostle. We have endeavoured to explain how the promise of God might suggest the hope of Abraham. But that this was his hope, however suggested, is the express assurance of the Holy Ghost in the New Testament. He "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." He declared plainly that he sought "a better country, that is, an heavenly."

III. Now, therefore, believers, behold your father Abraham. In virtue of the two promises he has received,—the first, conveying to him the Gospel blessing of a free justification,—the second, the Gospel expectation of an eternal inheritance,—see him furnished at all points, and equipped from head to foot, for his pilgrimage and warfare now, and for his rest and triumph hereafter. He has his "feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, and for an helmet the hope of salvation." Ye, therefore, who are his children, assume your father Abraham's garb. Put ye on his greaves and his head-piece. The gospel of peace,—the gospel which gives peace, even peace with God through Jesus Christ your Lord,—that blessed Gospel will prepare your feet, as well as Abraham's, for walking as strangers, for warring as soldiers, and for suffering as pilgrims here on earth. The hope of salvation,—the good hope of everlasting life,—will guard and adorn your head. Raised erect above the smoke and din of this earthly scene, you will fix your steadfast, and ever-brightening and kindling eye, as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, on the glory to be revealed at the Lord's second coming;—being in the meanwhile "changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

IV. Nor let it be overlooked, as a practical improvement of the doctrine which would identify the eternal inheritance of

the saints with the renovated earth,—and even Abram's peculiar portion of it, with the Holy Land,—that if, on the one hand, it may seem to attach something of the character of earth to the future heaven, it surely tends, on the other hand, to impart something of the holy elevation of heaven to this present earth. There may be a risk of making the eternal state, in our conceptions of it, too gross and material ; but there is danger also, in the dreamy and ideal spiritualising, which would refine away all matter, and which ultimately comes very near the notion of absorption into the Infinite Mind. The personal reality of hope, as well as the personal sense of responsibility, is thus turned into a dim abstraction. But the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the earth, realised as events still to come, stamp a present value and importance upon both ; and the reflection, that the very body which I now wear is to rise again, and the very earth on which I tread is to be my habitation hereafter, arrests me when I am tempted to make my body the instrument, or this earth the scene, of aught that would but ill accord with the glorious fashion of the one, or the renewed face of the other (Phil. iii. 21 ; Ps. civ. 30).

XVI.

VICTORY OVER THE INVADERS OF THE LAND—
INTERVIEW WITH MELCHIZEDEK.

GENESIS XIV.

He teacheth my hands to war.—Ps. xviii. 34. The less is blessed
of the better.—HEB. vii. 7.

THIS fourteenth chapter has the air and aspect of an episode in the history;—it stands out, singular and unique. The warlike character which Abram assumes is a solitary exception to the usual tenor of his life; and his subsequent interview with the Royal Priest is altogether peculiar.

I. Abram, for the most part a man of peace, quietly sojourning as a stranger in the land, suddenly appears at the head of an army, and signalises his martial prowess in the battle-field.

1. The occasion of his taking arms is the danger of his kinsman Lot. That righteous man, though he has imprudently involved himself in too close a connection with the wicked, is still reckoned as forming part of the household of faith; and while in this instance he pays dear for that selfish covetousness, or reckless inadvertence, which had tempted him to associate with men of the world, he experiences also the seasonable benefit of having a man of God as his friend.

It would seem that, before this time, the land of the Canaanites had been the scene of conquests and revolutions. In particular, the remarkable fertility of the plain of the Jordan, or "the vale of Siddim," together with the growing

wealth of the cities in the neighbourhood, made that portion of the country more especially liable to the scourge of war. Accordingly, it had attracted the cupidity of a foreign invader, who for a considerable time held undisputed sway over its petty princes ;—"Twelve years they served Chedarlaomer" (ver. 3, 4).

Who this Chedarlaomer was, must now be almost entirely matter of conjecture. It is in the briefest and slightest possible way, and only in so far as it incidentally touches his main subject, that the inspired writer notices the contemporary history of the Gentile world. In the present instance, however, something may be fairly gathered from the designation given to the potentate in question. He is described as king of Elam, and Elam is the scriptural name of Persia ; or at least it may here denote that part of Persia which was known in ancient history by the name of Elymais. At this period, probably, a Persian dynasty had arisen, in the race of Elam, who was one of the sons of Shem (chap. x. 22) ; and some have even thought that they could identify this Chedarlaomer with one or other of the early Persian kings, of whom a list is given in certain ancient annals.

That he was a conqueror, aiming at extensive empire, is very plain ; and he seems also to have obtained an ascendancy over the oldest and most powerful monarchies of the east. Among his three allies we find Amraphel, king of Shinar, which is the Babylonian plain (chap. x. 10, xi. 2) ;—evidently the head, at this time, of the Assyrian kingdom founded by Nimrod. Where the other two reigned, is quite uncertain. Ellasar, the country of which Arioch was king, is believed by some to be Syria ; and Tidal, king of nations, is supposed to have been either the ruler over a few petty tribes, or the captain of a roving band composed of recruits from various countries. Of the four, Chedarlaomer plainly takes the lead on this occasion ; and the expedition is mainly his. It was by him that this portion of Canaan had been subdued twelve

years before, and to him it had continued subject all that time ; its inhabitants paying him tribute, and their native princes acknowledging his supremacy, and ruling as his deputies. Impatient, however, of a foreign yoke, they found occasion, in the thirteenth year, to rebel ; and as in these days an extensive empire could be but little consolidated, and the power of a conqueror over a remote province must have been very precarious, they succeeded in regaining their independence (ver. 4). But the very next year (ver. 5), Chedarlaomer with his allies undertook a new expedition into Canaan ; and after making a rapid circuit, sweeping along the very verge of the wilderness, so as to subdue the surrounding nations from whom the rebels might have looked for help, he came down with his victorious troops upon the devoted cities of the plain ;—prepared to dart upon his prey, and eager to avenge the revolt of this refractory portion of his dominions (ver. 5–9).

It may be presumed that the state of luxury and extreme dissoluteness of manners into which they had fallen, but ill fitted the effeminate inhabitants for resisting the army before which their neighbours had fallen. The kings of the five principal cities did, indeed, muster their forces ; but, in a pitched battle with the four invading princes, they sustained a total defeat (ver. 8–10). The nature of the country, full of slime pits, dug for the supply of pitch or mortar for building, rendered retreat difficult, so that nearly the whole of the vanquished were cut off, a few only escaping to the mountains. Thus the cities were left defenceless, and fell an easy prey to the conquerors. Accordingly, having satiated their lust for plunder by the spoiling of the houses, they departed, carrying with them goods and victuals, as well as the women and others of the inhabitants (ver. 11 and 16).

In this calamity Lot and his household shared. It does not appear that he was personally implicated, either in the revolt which provoked the vengeance of Chedarlaomer, or in

the battle which ended so fatally for the native kings. But the disastrous issue of the contest affected him as well as the rest. The enemy made no distinctions ;—they had no respect of persons ;—they treated him with no ceremony ;—nor did they at all regard his character or his privileges, whether as a stranger or as a magistrate.* Still less did they stand in awe of his high calling, as a servant of the true God, and a man righteous in his generation. Why, indeed, should they ? What did they know of his righteousness ? Or what did they care for it ? They found him among those who had rebelled against them, and that was enough for them.

So it will most commonly happen when a man of God, for worldly ends, joins affinity or makes alliances with the ungodly. Those with whom he immediately connects himself may at first seem to spare him, having some advantage to gain by his countenance or his help—and feeling that his presence among them is a kind of shelter to themselves. They may show him some deference, and exempt him from the necessity of co-operating in some of their most indefensible schemes. But he is in a false and suspicious position, and he cannot long escape. In the eyes of indifferent spectators,—still more in the eyes of inveterate opponents,—he is confounded indiscriminately with his associates. Their enemies become his ; and searching out the faults, and resenting the injuries, of those with whom he keeps company, they involve him alike in the blame and in the revenge. Nor can he with any decency complain ;—he suffers but what he might expect. Finding him among the rebels, will the conquerors be apt to hear or to believe that he is

* Some fancy that, his character having raised him to the office of a civil ruler in the city, he was on that account exempted from military service ; while others ascribe his exemption to his being regarded as a stranger or a guest, and perhaps respected for his worth even in so worthless a community. It is all mere matter of conjecture ; and the point is of no consequence whatever.

innocent of the rebellion? Having been so unjust to himself, can he look for justice from them?

2. Such is the occasion on which Abram takes arms. But that he does so on the mere impulse of natural affection, however amiable, we can scarcely believe. He surely has divine warrant for what he does. He fights once, as he walks always—by faith. If it be to this affair that Isaiah refers (xli. 2, 3), his testimony is explicit as to the divine sanction given to Abram's enterprise. And even if the application of that passage in Isaiah be doubtful, we may safely judge that Abram would not have resolved beforehand on so unusual a step, and would not have received so remarkable a blessing afterwards, if it had been simply his own feelings, and not the express will of God, that he was obeying. For what right had Abram to wage this war? And what power had he to wage it successfully? Neither the right nor the power belonged to him naturally;—both were of faith. Both the right and the power flowed from him in whom he believed.

Thus as to the right,—what is Abram, viewing his position with the eye of sense, and apart from his peculiar character as the friend of God and the heir of the promise? He is merely a private individual, and a stranger too, in the land,—wealthy, indeed, but invested with no public or official authority. What title has he to levy arms? His kinsman's capture may be very grievous and offensive to him; he may be moved with compassion, and stirred up to anger; but is he at liberty, on that account, to put himself at the head of an army of his own, and to act as an independent captain or prince?

Besides, even if he should be so inclined, what power has he to give him any chance of success? What forces can he lead into the field? The males of his own household—three hundred and eighteen men—hastily prepared and armed;—for though three confederates are mentioned (ver. 13 and 24), it does not appear that they furnished any men for this enterprise. And with these he is to pursue a numerous army,

flushed with victory, and headed by four valiant monarchs. The exploit of Gideon was scarcely, to all outward appearance more desperate.

But Abram believed, and in faith he went forth to battle. It is the promise of God which gives him both the right and the power. It is as the lord of the country, made so by the promise of God,—it is as the real owner and legitimate ruler of it, that Abram, on this occasion, exercises the royal prerogative of making war. This one passing glimpse God saw fit to give of the true character of him, who to the eye of sense seemed to be nothing more than a private man, a pilgrim and sojourner, comparatively obscure and unknown; just as in the days of the Saviour's humiliation, it pleased the Father to show him once in the glory in which he is at last to reign. And as then, on the Mount of Transfiguration, there were three companions, eye-witnesses of Christ's glory, so it would almost seem as if the same number were purposely selected to be with Abram on the occasion of this unwonted manifestation of his high dignity. We read of three men, whether independent princes, or merely influential neighbours, does not appear,—though the last seems more probable,—who were confederate with Abram, who cultivated his friendship, and were disposed to make common cause with him; recognising in him something more than met the eye—some mark of his actual position as blessed, and made heir of the land by God.

For that there were a few among those with whom the patriarch met, who had some idea of what he really was, and of what he had a right to be, this very chapter testifies, in the instance of Melchizedek. Possibly also the messenger who brought Abram tidings of Lot's calamity may have been one of these;—"There came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew" (ver. 13). The message is brought to "Abram the Hebrew,"—a title which some have interpreted as referring merely to the patriarch's having come from beyond the river Euphrates, but which it is far more natural to under-

stand as denoting his descent from Heber or Eber. We have already seen that Eber was specially distinguished in the line of Shem (chap. x. 21), and that very probably it was he who was commissioned to announce that authoritative division of the earth, from which his son, Peleg, received his name. Eber, therefore, might well be held in remembrance in these early times; and it could scarcely fail to be known that, in the division of the earth, this particular portion had been reserved for his seed. Accordingly, when Abram appeared in Canaan, to distinguish him as the Hebrew, or the descendant of Eber, might fairly imply an acknowledgment of his high hereditary claims; and such an acknowledgment he might naturally receive from those who duly marked the ways of the Lord in regard to him. Hence the propriety of his being saluted in this connection as "Abram the Hebrew." If he was to come forward in the matter at all, as the messenger seemed to suggest, and as his three friends were prepared to expect, it must be in the character indicated by this patronymic title, or name of descent. If they thought it natural or reasonable that he should interfere, it must have been because they discerned his right to that character and that title,—a right not only founded on his descent from Eber, but confirmed by special promises given to himself. Otherwise, indeed, the idea of his acting as a prince and leading an army would scarcely have occurred, either to them or to himself. He is justified in what he does by his consciousness,—they are reconciled to it by their perception,—of his true rank and final destiny. For once, in his pilgrim state, God glorifies his servant before the eyes of all, as the proprietor and lord of the land.

Not, therefore, as a private person, not as a stranger and pilgrim,—which character he usually bore,—but as the heir, did Abram on this occasion take the sword, and wage war against the invaders of the kingdom which was his own; and thus for himself he received, and to all who had a spiritual discernment he gave, a pledge and earnest of things to come

It was an anticipation of the promise ; even as the transfiguration of Christ was a foretaste or foreshowing of the reward set before him, and the glory to be revealed in him.

3. Thus Abram for a brief space appears as a warrior-prince, and a conqueror. As a warrior, how just and generous is the cause of conflict ! As a conqueror, how noble and disinterested is his use of victory !

To rescue a lost kinsman is his single aim,—a kinsman, too, deserving of no such kindness at his hands. The separation which had taken place, not, as it would seem, very reluctantly on the side of Lot,—his selfish choice of the fairest portion of the land,—his rashly-formed connection with the wicked, for the sake of gain,—and his consequent distance and estrangement from his best and truest friend,—these things might almost have justified Abram in leaving him to his fate. But all past unkindness is forgotten, in pity for his present woful plight. Abram makes haste to help him ; nor does he fear, on his behalf, to encounter with a mere handful a mighty host. Such was the end of this war on the part of Abram—the deliverance of one of his own kinsmen and brethren out of the hands of the invading foe. That the men of Sodom shared for a season in the benefit of that deliverance, was an incidental consequence, not the main and primary purpose of his interposition. In rescuing Lot, he rescued also “their goods, and women, and people” (ver. 16). In their case, however, it was but a temporary respite that was thus procured for them ; they only perished the more miserably at the last. Nor was it for their sakes that Abram interfered ; whatever temporary advantage flowed to them was, as it were, by the way. The salvation of Lot was all that he sought.

In all this, who can fail to see a typical representation of the warfare of Christ himself ? He comes to bruise the serpent’s head,—to destroy the works of the devil,—to spoil principalities and powers,—to bind the strong man armed.

One result of his interposition is the respite granted to the impenitent and unbelieving,—who are rescued from immediate destruction and spared for a time on the earth. But, alas ! it is only, like the men of these doomed cities of the plain, to “treasure up unto themselves wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.” Christ, however, has a people of his own, whose deliverance is the real end of his enterprise. For their sakes he came single-handed to encounter the foe, whose name is Legion ; for their sakes he will not desist till, having followed up his conquest to the uttermost, he subdues even the last enemy, which is Death. Like Abram, he loves and will deliver those whom, in the face of ingratitude and estrangement, “having loved from the first, he loves to the last” as his own.

As the cause of war was just and generous, so the use which Abram made of victory was worthy of himself. Returning from this great exploit, he becomes at once a man of renown ; he has acquired a name and power which nothing in the land can resist ; great kings have fled before him, and have been destroyed. To the farthest corner of the land, even to Dan, he has pursued them with his little army of three hundred and eighteen men. Nay, beyond the borders of the land, he has penetrated even into Syria,—to the neighbourhood of Damascus itself (ver. 15) ; and he has struck a blow in which, although he does avail himself of the arts of war,—having recourse to a night attack, made simultaneously at different points (ver. 15),—still, considering his comparatively feeble force, the hand of God is conspicuously apparent. Thus powerful and mighty in battle, why may he not instantly take possession of the land ? It is at his feet ; why may he not occupy its throne ? Surely it is because he believes God ; he is not impatient or ambitious ; he seeks not an earthly, but a heavenly country. Having accomplished the single purpose for which he took this unusual step ; and having on that one occasion asserted and manifested his true character, as lord

and heir of the land ; he at once becomes a private man again. He is a stranger and pilgrim once more.

So scrupulous indeed is he, in his care to avoid the suspicion of a selfish or interested aim, that he refuses all share of the spoil. His companions, the three friends who accompanied him, he will not defraud of their portions ; but for himself he will take nothing ; nor will he suffer his young men to receive any recompense beyond the food they have eaten. Least of all, will he consent to receive hire from the king of Sodom, as though he were taking wages for the restoration of the persons or souls, by making the goods his own. "I have lift up," he says, "my hand unto the Lord, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoe-latchet, and that I will not take any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich : save only that which the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men which went with me, Aner, Eschol, and Mamre ; let them take their portion " (vers. 22-24). Nor is it in the mere affectation of a romantic and chivalrous independence that Abram thus rejects the king's well-meant proposal. His resolution had been formed before he undertook the expedition, and specially under the eye of him by whose authority he undertook it. From first to last the whole is of God and unto God alone. He is not the mercenary captain of a free company, to lend out his services to whoever will pay for them. It is as the independent head of a great nation, and the real owner of this whole territory, that he lays aside, as it were, for a few days, his disguise, or his incognito, and vindicates the title which belongs to him, as the heir of the divine promises, to the praise of the glory of divine sovereignty and grace.

Such is this memorable expedition. In its main and leading aspect,—the levying of war or the taking up of arms,—the conduct of Abram here is not a precedent for us. Still in its accompanying features this history is exemplary

in a high degree. The brotherly-kindness of the patriarch, his disinterestedness, and his heavenly-mindedness,—are exhibited in this transaction for a pattern to us. Whatever power we have, let it be used for our brother's deliverance; for doing good to all, especially to such as are of the household of faith. Let all suspicion of covetousness or of selfish ends be carefully excluded in all our undertakings; and in the height of earthly triumph, let it be seen that we can forego the tempting prize, and live still as strangers and pilgrims, seeking a better, that is a heavenly country.

But it is chiefly in a spiritual and prophetic light that the affair is to be viewed.

Spiritually, it may well be held to represent the victory of the Lord Jesus, and his triumph over principalities and powers in his cross. He then rescued the captives of Satan, and recovered the prey from the mighty. As his atoning blood shed for the remission of sins has satisfied divine justice, and opened the way to the Father,—so, “through his death, he hath destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivered those who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. ii. 14, 15). His people, therefore, are no longer under any necessity of making terms of precarious peace or compromise with “the father of lies” and “accuser of the brethren;” nor have they to wage with the “prince of this world” an unequal warfare, in which they are sure to be discomfited. Satan has lost his advantage over them; and, being no longer at his mercy, but standing on a firm footing in the free favour and almighty strength of their God, they may defy his malice, and make good their escape from his toils. But let none presume upon the victory which Christ has gained, as giving them warrant to live at ease. How many of those who were indirectly partakers in the fruits of Abraham's triumph, abusing the respite granted to them, perished miserably in the avenging fire which destroyed the cities of the plain. Let the

impenitent and unbelieving, who continue in sin because grace abounds, beware lest, in the end, a worse thing come upon them. And let his own people be careful to improve the victory which Christ has gained on their behalf, to stand fast in the liberty with which he has made them free, and not again be entangled in any yoke of bondage. Let them not sleep, as do others, while the fire is kindling which is to consume the wicked ; but let them watch and be sober.

Again, viewed prophetically, this incident presents to us the father of the faithful most vividly apprehending things to come. While as yet he has not a foot of ground that he can call his own, he assumes with all the calmness of undoubted sovereignty the right to act as the heir of the land. For a brief space, he exercises the functions of its lawful owner and ruler ; thus truly living by the power of the world to come. It is a pledge of the glory to be revealed which is here given,—a passing glimpse of the scene which is to be realised, when the promise made to Abram shall be fully accomplished, and he shall be put in possession of his long-deferred inheritance. Like the heavenly brightness which overwhelmed the three apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration, this unwonted adventure in the lowly life of the pilgrim, points to another order of things, and serves to give substance and evidence to what is still hoped for and unseen. We do not therefore follow cunningly devised fables, when we anticipate the “power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and of his saints with him. We are here, as it were, made “eye-witnesses” of the coming “majesty” of both. And we have the surer word of prophecy, unfolding to us the prospect of “many coming from the east and west, to sit down for ever with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.”

II. The interview with Melchizedek throws additional light on the faith of Abram. The endless questions which have been discussed respecting Melchizedek's person, as well

as the fancies of some of the early Christian fathers respecting the bread and wine, may be left altogether unnoticed. They have all arisen out of the vague impression which the Epistle to the Hebrews gives of there being a kind of mystery about the man. And so there is, in the scriptural sense of the word mystery ; there is a spiritual and figurative meaning in his history ; he is a typical personage. But the evil is, that the mystery has been supposed to lie in particulars where Paul gives no hint of it ; as in the mere personal identity of Melchizedek, or in his selection of bread and wine as a refreshment for Abram. The whole real mystery of Melchizedek, the commentator himself clears up. It lies, not in his person at all, but exclusively in his office. It is as a priest and prince that he is a mysterious, or rather, simply a typical, personage. And he is so, chiefly in respect of these two particulars,—first the significant appellations which he bears as king (Heb. vii. 2) ; and, secondly, the singular and isolated order of his priesthood (Heb. vii. 3).

As king, he bore the personal appellation of Melchizedek, or “king of righteousness ;” and the seat of his kingdom being Salem, he held the title of “king of Salem,” which means, king of peace. Whether this Salem was the city which afterwards became Jerusalem, or some other place nearer the vale of Siddim, and the river of Jordan (John iii. 23), does not appear ; nor, indeed, is it the precise locality, but the name, that is important. It was the King of righteousness and peace that Abram acknowledged in the very height of his own triumph, when he accepted Melchizedek’s hospitality, and received at his hands the refreshment of bread and wine.

Again, as priest, Melchizedek stood apart from all other priests, isolated and alone ; and Abram availed himself of his sacred offices in that character. Melchizedek accordingly, on the one hand, blessed Abram on God’s behalf,—“Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth”

(ver. 19); and again, on the other hand, he blessed God on Abram's behalf,—“And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hands” (ver. 20).

This brief and comprehensive form of benediction is, in truth, a summary of the entire priestly function; and it brings out, as comprised in one single and simple act, the whole ministry proper to the priest, as interposing or mediating between the great God in heaven, and the servant or worshipper of God on earth. What is a priest, but one through whose effectual offerings and intercession the blessing of God comes down upon man; and through whom, again, from man's deliverance, blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, redound to God “in the highest?”

In a very inferior and subordinate sense, men may bless one another, and may bless God on behalf of one another; but in the one case, it is merely the utterance of a desire or prayer; and in the other, a becoming expression of reverence and gratitude. But the act of Melchizedek evidently implies something more; it is authoritative and efficacious; he blesses as one having right to bless—as one whose ministry really and actually does bring good to man, on the one hand, and praise to God, on the other. What good does it bring to man? Is it not all the fulness of God? What praise does it bring to God? Is it not all the praise of man's salvation?

How marvellous; how full of meaning, is this alternation or reciprocation, this intercommunion between God and man, of which the priest becomes the minister! Between the two parties, a transference or blessed exchange takes place, the highest property of each being imparted or ascribed to the other. For who, in this case, are the parties? God, on the one side, “the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth;” and Abram, on the other, saved in battle, and victorious over all his enemies. And what is this double blessing? What does it imply? What but this; that the Lord's prerogative, as possessor of heaven and earth, becomes virtually

Abram's ; and Abram's glory, as victorious over all his enemies, becomes truly the Lord's ?

Oh, most blessed traffic, most profitable exchange ! Who can hesitate about closing with so advantageous a treaty ? Abram has the benefit of God being the possessor of heaven and earth ; God has the glory of Abram's victory over his enemies. How gracious the arrangement ! How reasonable, equitable, and righteous ! What can faithful Abram say to it ? Can he demur to the terms proposed ; holding fast the praise of his victory as his own, and saying,—my own right hand has got it ? Can he be for taking the credit of it to himself, and reckoning on the like success, as always at his command ? That would be miserable policy,—poor economy indeed ! Better far, even in a prudential point of view, to give it all over to God ; and to receive instead of it a vested interest, if one may venture so to speak,—a right of property,—in God himself, the Lord, Jehovah, as “the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth.”

Besides thus blessing Abram, Melchizedek received tithes at his hand,—“tithes of all” (ver. 20)—whether tithes of all the spoil of his enemies, or tithes of all his own property, is not said ;—probably it was the tenth of both. How the custom of paying tithes originated, and by what authority it was sanctioned in these early days, we stay not now to inquire. One thing, however, may be clearly gathered from the traces which we find of this usage, whether in the Bible or in other ancient writings, that it was intimately associated with the institution of the priesthood, and the offering of sacrifices. In his character of mediator, the priest received tithes. He received them as the pledge and token of the whole of what was tithed being the Lord's—of its belonging to God, and being freely dedicated and consecrated to him. For as the ordained and appointed medium or channel of communication between God and man, the priest not merely conveyed the gift of God to man, but conveyed also man's gifts to God.

The blessing bestowed on the part of God passed through his hands, and so also did the offices and services rendered on the part of man. Such is the priestly function, as discharged by Melchizedek and acknowledged by Abram.

But who or what is this Melchizedek, that he should be competent for such a function? He is, it is true, a king and priest together; but so were many heads of families and tribes in these days; and so, virtually, was Abram himself. Abram officiated as a priest when he built an altar—wherever he went—to the Lord; and on this one occasion, at least, the occasion on which he came in contact with Melchizedek, he acted as a king, going forth to battle and returning in triumph. In this respect, therefore, and in so far as the mere union of the two dignities of royalty and priesthood in one person was concerned, there was nothing very peculiar in Melchizedek's position; Abram himself stood almost on the same footing. What, then, does this transaction mean?

1. Melchizedek was undoubtedly an eminently holy man, a believer in the true God and in the promised Messiah; and accordingly the interview between him and Abram, considered merely as the meeting of two heaven-owned saints and patriarchs, is full of interest. The one is a remarkable example of the grace of God—preserving, amid the dregs of a general apostasy, an elect remnant; the other is an instance no less striking of that divine and sovereign grace bringing in, from without, a new seed. And the two, meeting thus as debtors to the same grace, cannot but rejoice in mutually recognising and acknowledging each other. It is as if the torch were here visibly handed over from the last of the former band, to the first of that which is to succeed. The church is transferred to a new stock or stem; the cause receives a new impulse, and is to have a fresh start; and this singular transaction between Melchizedek and Abram, is the connecting link between the two systems, or orders, or dispensations, of which the one is now waxing old, and the other is but just beginning

to appear. The general and unrestricted dispensation of religious faith and worship, transmitted indiscriminately by tradition among all the descendants of Noah, is about to give place to a dispensation limited to a particular family or race, to whom ultimately are to be committed the oracles of God. One form of the primitive order is to be superseded by another ;—the patriarchal institute is to be succeeded by the Levitical and legal ordinances which are to be established in Abram's house. And the substantial identity of the two, the Patriarchal and the Levitical, is indicated by the meeting of their respective representatives. It is like aged Simeon, embracing in his arms the infant Saviour ;—the last patriarch and prophet of the law not departing till he sees and hails the new-born hope of the Gospel ; the lingering twilight of declining day mingling with the dawn of a better morn.

2. But a higher view still is to be taken of this transaction. This is plain from the use which the apostle makes of it, and the importance which he attaches to it (Heb. vii.). Melchizedek officiated as the type of the Messiah, who was to be a priest after the same order with himself ; and Abram undoubtedly had respect to him in that character. It was not the mediation of a mere man that he acknowledged ; it was not the ministry of an earthly priest in which he trusted. Melchizedek, king and priest as he was, could not really and effectually convey to Abram the blessing of the most high God, the possessor of heaven and of earth ; nor was it through him that the glory of Abram's victory, and the tithes of his spoil and of his goods, could be acceptably transmitted to God. But a greater than Melchizedek is here ; present, surely, not indeed to the senses, but to the minds of both. In his name, Melchizedek acts, and to him, in Melchizedek's person, Abram does homage. The two patriarchs understand one another. Melchizedek, as the last preserver, as it were, of the primitive patriarchal hope, hands over his function to one more highly favoured than himself, in the very spirit of the Baptist—"He

must increase, but I must decrease " (John iii. 30). His own occupation, as a witness and standing type of the Messiah, is over ; one newly called out of heathenism is to succeed and to take his place. Melchizedek is content. He hails in Abram the promised seed, and blesses him accordingly ; while again, in Melchizedek, Abram sees, however dimly, the day of Christ, and Christ himself. Thus the Patriarchal, the Abrahamic, and the Levitical dispensations appear, all of them, in their true character, as subordinate and shadowy ; and in the eye of faith Christ is all in all.

3. Let it be noted also that it is especially in contrast with the Levitical priesthood in the house of Aaron, that the apostle exalts and magnifies the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. His object is to satisfy the Hebrew Christians as to the reality of Christ's priesthood, and to instruct them as to its nature. For this purpose he cites the deed or decree of nomination or appointment : " Jehovah hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek " (Ps. cx. 4) ; appealing to this irrevocable oath as the warrant for regarding the Messiah as invested in perpetuity with the priestly office (Heb. vii.). Nor could exception be taken to his being held to be a priest, because he was not of the house of Aaron. This might have been an insuperable bar to his claim, had he sought to minister in the earthly sanctuary, and to be the mediator of the Levitical covenant. But as our forerunner, he has entered for us within the veil, into the true sanctuary, the heavenly place itself ; and his ministry is connected with another dispensation altogether, and with another covenant. Neither, again, could it be objected that this was an after-thought—a theory devised by the followers of Jesus to serve a purpose and make the old Scriptures tally with the new faith of a crucified Messiah. For the very charter of the Messiah's priesthood, from the first announcement of it,—the very word of the oath by which it was solemnly declared that he was to be a priest,—intimated that

his priesthood was to be entirely distinct from that of Levi's house, and of another order altogether. It was not necessary that he should be of the Levitical order : it was expressly foretold that he was to be of the order of Melchizedek.

4. But even this does not satisfy the apostle, or exhaust the meaning of that marvellous oath of God on which he is authoritatively commenting. It is not enough to make out that it establishes, against all objections that might be taken to it, the unquestionable reality and validity of Christ's priesthood, as having undoubted divine sanction. It does that, but it does a great deal more. It opens up a glorious spiritual view of the nature of his priesthood ; and it suggests various particulars in respect of which his priesthood, being the one only Messianic priesthood, is pre-eminent in itself, and fruitful of all rich and heavenly blessings to his believing people.

Thus, in the first place, it is a royal priesthood, which that of Aaron's house and of the Levitical order was not, and could not be. Christ is "a priest upon his throne" (Zech. vi. 13) ; and as his priesthood effectually establishes "the counsel of peace" between God and man, so his kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness and peace (Ps. lxxii.). Again, secondly, as a priest, he has no pedigree or genealogy ; he has none going before or coming after him in the priestly office ; he is alone in his priesthood during all its time ; he continueth a priest for ever. Then, in the third place, the order of his priesthood is prior in point of date, and superior in point of dignity, to that of Aaron's or Levi's priesthood ; for when Levi, in the person of his ancestor Abraham, paid tithes to Melchizedek and received his blessing, he virtually acknowledged a higher priesthood than his own. And, fourthly, this acknowledgment of another priesthood, of a different order,—proved to be superior by the double test of blessing accepted and tithes given—evidently implies a certain imperfection in the Levitical priesthood, and therefore in the dispensation with which it was connected. The Levitical priesthood was not intended to be per-

petual and permanent ; it served a temporary purpose, until that other Priest of another order should arise.

From all this it follows, that when that other Priest of another order has come, his priesthood supersedes all that went before it ; and being in the hands of one who continueth ever ; and being ratified, moreover, by the divine oath ; it cannot be changed. The Levitical priesthood was held by a succession of mortal men, infirm, and liable to death ; and it was instituted without the solemnity of an oath.' This last circumstance indicated the character of the economy to which that priesthood belonged, as being of the nature of a provisional, or, as it were, parenthetical, arrangement. It was not confirmed by an appeal to the two immutable things—the divine word and the divine nature, which enter into the idea of the divine oath. In other words, the Levitical dispensation and its priesthood did not form an essential part of that plan or system, to which the honour of God is committed, and with which his glory is inseparably blended and identified,—which, therefore, must be as irrevocably unchangeable as God himself is. The Levitical law was given, and the Levitical order of priests ordained, to serve a temporary purpose ; and, accordingly, the formality of an oath was omitted. But the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, enters into the very essence of the everlasting covenant. Hence, “not without an oath is Christ made an high priest ;” and hence, also, as a high priest, he is the mediator, not of a shadowy and burdensome legal ritual, which was to wax old and vanish away, but of that grace and truth which came by him, and which in him endure for ever.

Such, in substance, is the reasoning of the apostle, in the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews ; and such is the exalted view which he gives of the priesthood of Melchizedek, as distinct from that of Levi, and identical, in its order, with that of Christ. Such is the High Priest, suited to the necessity of man's case ; one who is not only touched with the feeling of

our infirmities, but able also “to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (ver. 25).

In the person of Melchizedek, therefore, let us hail a present Saviour ; and in what passed between him and our father Abraham, let us recognise the reality and fulness of his ministry of love toward us. Receiving in him and through his mediation, the blessing of “the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth,” we are filled with all the fulness of God ;—“All things are ours ; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come ; all are ours.” Then, again, in Christ, having “redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of the free grace of God,” we are appointed to be “to the praise of his glory.” In us, and on our behalf, Christ glorifies the Father. Our escape from guilt, and our consequent victory over all our enemies, form the theme of the new song of praise. With the whole multitude of the redeemed, we ascribe salvation to our God, who sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb ; and we present the first fruits of our deliverance, in the dedication of ourselves to the service of God for ever.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto him, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. xii. 1). “By him also, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name. And to do good and to communicate let us forget not ; since with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. xiii. 15, 16).

XVII.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH—INSIGHT INTO
THINGS TO COME.

GENESIS XV.

THE revelation recorded in this chapter closely followed the victory over the kings, and the interview with Melchizedek. It seems designed to bring out the patriarch in a new character;—that of a prophet, or an authorised and accredited depository of the will and the counsels of God.

The announcement of the communication which God now makes to Abram is in peculiar language: “The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision” (ver. 1). It is the first time this expression occurs, although afterwards it is extremely common in the Bible. In the use of it, there is generally, if not always, a special reference to the prophetic office. There are examples of this in the historical books (1 Sam. iii. 7; 1 Kings xiii.) ; and instances from the writings of the prophets themselves might be multiplied indefinitely. Their usual form of speech, indeed, is this, “The word of the Lord came;” and of their “visions” we read continually. In fact, so continually is the phrase in question,—“The word of the Lord came,” or “spake,” or was “revealed,”—identified with prophetic inspiration, that we may partly see in it an explanation of the significant appellation given to the Son, “THE WORD.” He is so called as the revealer of the Father (John i. 18). His Spirit was in the prophets, and he spake by them. And it may be with reference to his immediate personal agency, as connected

with all revelation, that this came to be the standing mode of announcing a prophetic oracle,—“The WORD of the LORD came.”

Viewing, then, Abram as presented to us in this chapter in a new light—that of a prophet, properly so called—we are to observe, in the first place, his inauguration into that office as one personally accepted in the sight of God ; and secondly, the first prophetic disclosure, in circumstantial detail, of the future fortunes of the people of God.

I. That he may be qualified for receiving the prophetic communication, he must first be himself owned as on a right footing personally with God. And he is so owned very emphatically and unequivocally.

“After these things,” that is, after the events of the previous chapter, and very shortly after them, the vision of this chapter took place. It was a vision of great compass and importance, and it occupied a considerable space of time ; reaching from midnight, or at least from before the earliest dawn of morning, till the darkness of another evening closed in. For it was surely a real scene that Abram, though rapt in prophetic ecstasy, beheld, when God led him forth, and bade him look at the starry heavens (ver. 5). This must have been before the sun arose. As the sun is going down, we find the seer still watching beside the sacrifice he has prepared, and falling exhausted into the awful trance which is to be the means of giving him an insight into the sealed book of the providence of God (ver. 12). An entire day, then, is spent in this vision. Was it the Sabbath? Was Abram, like John, “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day?” (Rev. i. 10). This first prophecy, beginning to unfold the peculiar history of the Old Testament Church, is in some sort parallel to that last Revelation of John the Divine, in which all the vicissitudes of the New Testament Church are opened up. It is not, therefore, altogether a fanciful analogy which would connect the day here spent by Abram with that on which John records that he was in the Spirit.

1. In either case, the interview begins with the same gracious words of encouragement addressed personally to the prophet. "Fear not," says "one like unto the Son of man" to the apostle (Rev. i. 17)—"Fear not, Abram," is the corresponding salutation of the "WORD of the LORD" to the patriarch. John, indeed, mentions a loud voice previously heard by him, and a wondrous sight seen (Rev. i. 10-17); and, in doing so, does he not supply what is left to be inferred in this narrative respecting Abram? He accounts for the fear which, in his own case, the Lord made it his first business to remove. And may not the same explanation be understood to be intended in the case of Abraham? When it is said, "the Word of the Lord came unto him in vision" (ver. i.), must not this imply, not only an audible sound, but also a visible manifestation? And may we not with great probability suppose that Abram, like John, "heard behind him a great voice as of a trumpet;" and "turning, saw a glorious person;" and seeing him, "fell at his feet as dead?" (Rev. i. 10-17). Most certainly, whatever was the occasion of it, he must have been overwhelmed with amazement and terror, when the Lord found it necessary, in kindness and condescension, to say to him, as to John, "Fear not, Abram."

And the argument for the removal of fear is the same in both instances, being simply the gracious manner in which the person speaking discovers himself, and makes himself known: "Fear not, for it is I"—it is I, "thy shield and thy exceeding great reward" (ver. 1)—"it is I, the first and the last, the living one" (Rev. i. 17, 18).

In both cases, also, there is probably an appeal to the past. Thus, when the Word of the Lord says to Abram, "I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward," there is surely a reference to the battle and to the victory—to the fight and to the triumph. Dost thou not know me, Abram? It was I who shielded thee in the recent battle; it was I who rewarded thee in the victory. Didst not thou forego all other recompense for me? Didst

thou not renounce all the spoils of conquest, and take me as thine only portion? And have not I been thy reward? And is it not a reward exceeding great? Then, "fear not," since it is I who speak to thee. "Fear not," though the voice be as a trumpet, and the vision terrible in its glory: "Be of good cheer, it is I, be not afraid." It is I, whom thou hast found to be not only able to save, but all-sufficient to bless. "It is I," thy shield in war, and thy reward in victory—thy Saviour and Redeemer, "thy God and thy portion for ever."

The simple discovery of himself on the part of the Lord is enough for John. But, in the circumstances in which Abram is placed, there is a special difficulty to be got over. When the "Word of the Lord came in vision" to John, the great battle was already actually fought, and the great victory won, of which Abram, in his successful encounter with the kings, had received but a remote and shadowy type. In particular, in the case of Abram, the very Being by whom the great salvation is to be accomplished, that mysterious person, of old announced as the Seed of the woman, and more recently, as destined to be of his own race, is still to come, and his coming has been made to depend upon a condition, growing daily, as it would seem, more hopeless. "I go childless" (ver. 2). I am childless now; childless I have passed through life hitherto; and childless, it would almost appear, I am to pass away. My time is running on, my years are drawing to a close, and still, alas! still "I go childless."

Is there impatience in this complaint? What wonder if there be? Abram begins to fear, lest his present earthly portion may turn out to be his all. He has become rich and prosperous notwithstanding the disinterestedness which he twice so remarkably practised—first, in ceding to Lot the best of the land, and then in refusing all the spoils of the war waged on Lot's behalf. In a temporal sense, he has received a large recompense for his generosity and forbearance; but is it with such a reward, or with more of the same kind, that he is to be

put off, instead of the blessing promised in his seed? In a better spirit than that of Haman, he seems to say that all this availeth him nothing, so long as the one thing on which he has been taught to set his heart is withheld. Lord God, what wilt thou give me—what canst thou give me as my reward—what that will avail me any thing “seeing I go childless?” Nor is it merely an heir of his worldly possessions that he desires; that he can find—that he has already. This Eliezer of Damascus might suffice, if that were all he needed. But where is the promise of the Saviour? “To me thou hast given no seed.”

Such is Abram’s expostulation; thus he opens his whole heart to God. He does not keep silence when his sorrow is stirred,—painfully or sullenly musing when the fire burns (Ps. xxxix.). He may be obliged to restrain himself in the presence of the weak or the wicked among his fellow-men, who might have no sympathy with his anxiety and grief; but before his God he may lay bare his inmost soul, and make all his thoughts and feelings known. And even if they be thoughts of unbelief and feelings bordering on sin,—the suggestions of sense and sight contending against faith,—the groanings of the flesh lusting against the Spirit, better far that they be spread fairly out in the gracious eye of the blessed Lord, than that they be nursed and pent up in his own bosom to breed distrust and estrangement there.

Come, thou timid, shrinking, doubtful soul,—come forth and frankly, freely, fearlessly meet thy God. “Fear not.” Speak, as his own Spirit moves thee, for his Spirit helpeth thy infirmities. But thou knowest not what to say. Then, with thy groanings which cannot be uttered, the Spirit will make intercession for thee, and the Searcher of hearts will know the mind of the Spirit in thee, as he takes thy secret sighs and tears, and lays them out as thy pleadings with thy God. Only “fear not.” Let thy difficulty, thine objection, thy doubt, whatever it is, be imparted to the Lord, as Abram’s was. What though it be thine infirmity? Will he not pity

it? Will he not teach thee to remember the years of the right hand of the Most High? (Ps. lxxvii. 10)'.

2. So he teaches Abram. From his tent, where first he met with him,—from his bed, perhaps, which he has been watering with his tears,—the Lord raises the patriarch, and leads him out, and places him beneath the glorious midnight sky (ver. 4, 5). Seest thou these hosts of heaven? Canst thou reckon them? No. But he who speaks to thee can. He can count them. He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names; and to thee he saith, “So shall thy seed be.” Here is the perfection of science—the highest sublimity of the most sublime of all the sciences—the most glorious lesson in astronomy the world ever learned. In the still and solemn silence of earth’s unbroken slumber—under the deep azure arch of heaven—not a breath stirring—not a cloud passing,—then and there, to stand alone with God,—to stand with open eye, and behold his works,—to stand with open ear, and hear his word—his word to thee! These stars;—canst thou number them? Look now toward heaven and tell them; these all I ordained, and even such a seed have I ordained to Abram! Thus, in the undimmed glory of their multitudinous hosts, shining still, as they shone, when he talked with Abram, the Lord calls thee, on each returning night, to hail the renewed assurance of that promise on which all thy hope, as well as Abram’s, must hang. So shall the seed of Abram—his seed, embracing Christ, and all that are his—and therefore not excluding thee—so shall the seed of Abram be.

The promise thus made Abram at once believed,—on the mere word of him who rules the starry host, and who “calls the things that are not as though they were.” He believes, and “God counts it unto him for righteousness” (ver. 6).

Such is the testimony here borne concerning Abram,—that testimony of which Paul makes so much use in his two epistles to the Romans and the Galatians, when he is establishing the blessed doctrine, so glorifying to God—so gracious to the sin-

ner, on which it is his delight to dwell,—the doctrine of justification by faith alone without works. He quotes the verse before us repeatedly as the scriptural evidence and assurance of the way in which the patriarch was justified before God. “Abraham believed God, and he counted it to him,” or it was counted to him for “righteousness;” or still more indefinitely, he believed God, and righteousness was counted or imputed to him. He believed, and was reckoned or accounted righteous. For such, in substance, is the force of this important testimony. It is a testimony to the sole and exclusive efficacy of faith, as the act by which a justifying righteousness is apprehended and appropriated. It is in this light that Paul regards the testimony here recorded, and it is for this purpose that he uses it;—as speaking not of the ground of a sinner’s justification, but only of the instrument of it. The ground of justification is not expressly mentioned in this record at all, which is simply an attestation of Abram’s faith, and of the sufficiency of his faith alone, as the instrument of his justification. But the power or efficacy of faith to justify, cannot be in itself; for, by its very nature, faith ever looks beyond itself, and borrows all from without; if it rely on itself,—on any worth, or value, or virtue, in itself,—it ceases to be faith,—it becomes quite another act or exercise of mind. It is no longer faith in God, but faith in some good work of my own; it may be faith in my very faith itself, and not in what my faith should grasp. But it is expressly said, “Abram believed God,” and that—namely, his simply believing God—that alone justifies him.

As to the origin and character, moreover, of the faith which justified Abram, it is important to remark that we have not here any explicit testimony. We gather indeed conclusively from the frame of mind which its exercise must have implied;—from the entire subordination of the carnal to the spiritual and the seen to the unseen; above all, from the simplicity of personal reliance upon God and the cordiality of personal submission to God, which may be traced in this marvellous act of

believing such a promise in such circumstances ;—that it could be no mere effort of human volition or bare conviction of the human understanding. Beyond all question, the faith called forth on this occasion is above all human capacity ; no reasoning or persuasive influence can command it ; no power of human thought or will can reach it. It is of divine workmanship,—created in the renewal of the whole nature by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost. And it is divine in its character as well as in its origin ; uniting the soul to God ; assimilating the soul to God ; making it partaker of the divine fellowship and the divine holiness.

Being thus the work of God,—and a work so precious and heavenly,—such faith as Abram's might well be singled out as having an efficacy to place him on a right footing before God, and inspire him with a right heart towards God. Still let it be remembered that it is not this divine excellency of faith that forms the subject of the historian's testimony and the apostle's application of it ;—but the one only point of its being absolutely and entirely alone, without works of any kind, in this transaction of the patriarch's free justification through his simple trust in the bare and naked word of the living God. He had no thought on that night of his own faith at all,—or of any virtue, divine or human, that his faith might possess. But “he believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness.”

Precisely the same phrase here used respecting Abram, is repeated, but repeated once only, in the Old Testament, and is applied to Phinehas, in reference to the terrible vengeance which he inflicted on his guilty countryman ;—“Then stood up Phinehas, and executed judgment ; and so the plague was stayed, and that was counted unto him for righteousness unto all generations for evermore” (Ps. cvi. 30, 31). The act which Phinehas performed on that occasion, was performed in faith. He executed judgment, because he believed in the Lord ; and it was exclusively on account of the faith in which he acted

that it was counted unto him for righteousness, or, in other words, that he was personally justified, and that his service, consequently, was accepted also. But observe the difference between the two cases. It is the same faith ; but in Phinehas it wrought with his works, while in Abram, in this instance, it was alone. In other instances, this faith of Abram was not alone. His faith, as well as that of Phinehas, wrought with his works ; as when “by faith he went out, not knowing whither he went,” and when “by faith he offered up his son Isaac.” On these occasions, Abram, like Phinehas, had to work as well as to believe. But here he has simply and solely to believe. Hence the selection of this particular instance as that on the ground of which emphatic testimony is to be borne to the sole and exclusive efficacy of faith, in the justifying of the sinner. And mark how appropriate the selection is. Generally, faith is exhibited to us in active operation, prompting good works or acts of obedience ; and these may seem to have some share in procuring the benefit. Here, on the other hand, from the very necessity of the case, all working, all acting, is out of the question. There can be positively nothing, on Abram’s part, but only faith—faith alone. On that starry night he has nothing whatever to do,—nothing whatever to suffer,—nothing whatever to sacrifice,—nothing whatever to undertake or promise. He simply believes the Lord,—takes God at his word,—and closes with him in his free promise. That is all, and it is enough.

Doubtless, when occasion offers, this faith is found to be accompanied by works ; and then Abram is as truly justified by faith thus working, or by these works of faith, as Phinehas was by his act of faithful obedience. But, even then, though it is faith working, or faith doing good works, that may be rightly said to justify him, his justification after all depends on his faith alone. So the Apostle James teaches, when dealing with these very cases. For the practical purpose of his epistle, he takes examples of faith as it ordinarily exists and appears,

not solitary and separate, but having in its train good works and holy graces ; his object being to show, that justifying faith must ever have such a train ; and must ever, as opportunity occurs, be alive and alert for action. But still, in the view of the Spirit, even when these works and graces most abound, it is in respect of the faith round which they cluster, that Abram is justified ; and in respect of that alone. From first to last, Abram believed in the Lord, and through his faith alone, the divine righteousness on which it laid hold being imputed to him, he was accepted as righteous. But generally, he was called simultaneously to believe and to act ; his faith and his obedience were, as it were, combined and mixed up together ; and even to himself, the warrant of his peace and hope might not be always quite clear. It was fitting, therefore, that once, at least, he should be brought into a position in which all ambiguity must necessarily be cleared away, and the simple and glorious truth made plain and palpable to his soul. Such an era, such a crisis was this precious night, on which he stood alone with God, under the azure sky,—with no possible condition to fulfil, and no work at all to do. God speaks ;—Abram believes ;—and all is settled, all is sure.

A similar crisis, once, or it may be oftener, every believer must, in his own experience, know ;—a time when he is, as it were, shut up to the necessity of taking God simply at his word ;—believing what God testifies, and merely because he testifies it ;—without any, even the least respect, to any thing in or about himself, to any grace he may be exercising or any duty he may be doing or any purpose he may be forming. Blessed is such an era—doubly blessed,—whether you consider the past or the future. From how many dark thoughts and perplexing questions of unbelief, does it give instant and glad relief ! What a preparation is it for whatever prospect may be opening before you ! Groping in vain for some tangible ground on which to rest,—seeking to reconcile sense and faith,—walking still by sight, you cannot perceive how, on

your behalf the promises of God can possibly be made good. Palpable contradictions, such as that in the case of Abram between his own childless state and the blessing centred in his seed, shake and stagger you. You see not how such sin as yours can be forgiven ; you see not any thing in you to explain the marvel of its forgiveness ; you are as unfruitful and barren as was Abram ; and how, then, can you be blessed ?

Oh, happy day, or night, when, after much weary toil, and many a device and expedient tried, you are led forth by the Lord himself ;—you alone meeting with him alone ; and are made to rest on his mere word ; not asking how it may be, but believing that so it must be ; believing this, because—simply because—HE says it,—HE, who calls the things that are not as though they were, and telleth all the stars ! Then, the tossed soul returns unto its rest ; and then, whether the future be shrouded in darkness or revealed in sadness, the mind, stayed on God, is kept in peace. Strengthened, settled, comforted and established by grace, it can stand any shock, trusting in the Lord.

II. Abram needs all the assurance implied in his being thus justified by faith, to nerve him for the insight into the future which, as a prophet, he is to receive. What is now to be revealed to him is not for himself or his household, but for remote posterity ; that he may minister instruction and hope to the church of an age yet to come. For the sake of Israel, four hundred years hereafter, this prophetic vision is given to Abram ;—while as to himself personally, it opens up a very mingled and chequered prospect.

At the very outset, however, God renews the promise of the heavenly inheritance. “I am the Lord,” I am JEHOVAH, “that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it” (ver. 7).

Certainly God does seem here to lay weight and emphasis on his name, Jehovah, notwithstanding what is said afterwards ; —“I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by

the name of God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah was I not known to them" (Exod. vi. 3). Nor is there any real inconsistency here. It cannot be meant in that passage that the name Jehovah was literally unknown to the patriarchs, or that God, in his intercourse with them, never appealed to it. The idea rather is, that as God appeared in their days chiefly in the attitude of giving promises, whereas in the time of Moses he appeared to fulfil them, his attribute of power was principally concerned in the former case, and his attribute of faithfulness and unchangeableness in the latter. The patriarchs had to look to him as God Almighty; able, in due time, to accomplish all the promises which he was then giving them. Moses and the Israelites were to know him as Jehovah, unalterably true after the lapse of ages; truly fulfilling his promises given long before. But it does not follow from this general rule that the view of God implied in his name Jehovah was altogether concealed from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or that it was never used to impart to their souls strong consolation and good hope through grace. On the contrary, the apostle, writing to the Hebrews, expressly tells us, that to Abraham God "swore by himself;" or, as he explains it, in support of his unchangeable word, appealed to his unchangeable nature or name (vi. 13-18). And if on any occasion his name of immutability could be seasonably and suitably used, it was at the opening of such a revelation as this. Referring, accordingly, to his first dealing with Abram, while yet in the midst of heathenism, and to the ultimate design of all his dealing with him, God assures him of the immutability of his counsel, by pledging the immutability of his name. "I am the LORD JEHOVAH," who called thee and promised to bless thee. And whatever may be the darkness of the troubled scene now to be set before thee, it is thy privilege still to know that he who has brought thee out of Ur to inherit this land, is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever."

The transaction which follows still further encourages

Abram personally, amid the clouds which are soon to gather over the fortunes of his race. It is the ratifying of a solemn covenant, by which he may know that he is to possess the land. That is the point on which Abram desires to have his faith confirmed; "Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (ver. 8). This is not the question of doubt or of unbelief, asked in the spirit of "an evil and adulterous generation seeking a sign;" on the contrary, it is asked immediately after that exercise of faith concerning which such explicit testimony has been borne. And that makes all the difference. To ask or require a sign before believing, in order to believing and as the condition of believing, is unbelief and sin. But if I first believe the Lord, on his mere word, I may thereafter humbly hope to have some pledge of his promises. "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief," is the fitting frame of mind for all of us. I believe in God now, for present pardon and acceptance in his sight. But the future is dark, and I am compassed about with infirmities;—"Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit the land?"

In reply, Abram receives an assurance, substantially the same as that to which the Apostle Peter refers as the assurance of his own hope of glory, and the hope of all like-minded with himself (2 Peter i. 16-21).

I. Like Peter and his companions "on the holy mount," Abram is an "eye-witness of the heavenly majesty." He beholds the "excellent glory" of the Lord; and by this he knows that it is no "cunningly-devised fable" that he "follows," but a glorious and blessed reality. The Lord shows him his glory, in token of the inheritance in store for him. And the manifestation of that glory is through death; through "an horror of great darkness falling upon him." It is through a propitiatory offering. For a sacrifice is prepared, consisting of the very victims, and what is remarkable enough, of all the victims subsequently used in the typical sacrifices of the Levitical dispensation. The animals are slain, and set

in order, whether immediately by the hand of the Lord himself, or by Abram acting under his directions, does not very clearly appear;—though the latter is, on the whole, the most probable supposition (ver. 9, 10). In either view, the animals are slain; and the sacrifice is prepared and laid out. There is death,—the death of ordained and appointed victims. And what then?—what follows hereafter? Silence and suspense. Abram sits beside the dead limbs,—the divided fragments;—he sits and watches, scarcely saving them from the assaults of the devouring birds of the air;—“When the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away” (ver. 11). All through the live-long day he waits and keeps guard, warding off these ravenous invaders; and when the setting sun admonishes them to seek their nests, he too is weary, and a heavy slumber or trance falls strangely and dreamily upon him (ver. 12). It is, as it were, “their hour and the power of darkness;”—of darkness as of the shadow of death. But out of the darkness light shines forth, and in the death there is life (ver. 17).

“Between the pieces” of the slaughtered victims, “a smoking furnace and a burning lamp” are seen to pass. These are surely the visible emblems of the great God; corresponding to what was afterwards known as the Shechinah, or the GLORY OF THE LORD. In passing through, they probably consumed the pieces, as was usual on other similar occasions (Judges vi. 21, xiii. 19, 20). In the acceptance of the sacrifice, the glory of God is seen; and the heart of him who is thus an eye-witness of his majesty is reassured respecting “the power and coming of the Lord.”

So it was in the case of Peter and his two companions on the Mount. In stating the ground of his confidence respecting the future glory, he appeals to his past personal experience;—to what he had already seen of that very glory at the scene of the Transfiguration. Then and there he beheld the glory of the Lord—“the glory as of the only begotten of

the Father"—that glory of which, even when he dwelt on earth, Christ was thus once at least seen to be possessed, and in which, therefore, it might well be believed that he would come at the latter day. And it is to be particularly observed, that on the mount that glory was revealed in immediate connection with sacrifice—the sacrifice of the Lord himself; “the decease which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.” That was the theme of conversation between the Lord and his two heavenly companions there. Moses and Elias, representing the law and the prophets, thus attested the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow; and it was with special reference to his mediatorial character and work, that the voice from heaven, out of the excellent glory, proclaimed;—“This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” Nor is it unworthy of remark, as an additional coincidence, that as “a deep sleep fell upon Abram,” so the three chosen witnesses on the mount were “heavy with sleep” (Luke ix. 32). That scene of mingled gloom and glory was as overpowering to them as this was to Abram; and the animating hope with which both scenes were full fraught, must have been as precious in the afterthought to Abram, as it was during all their lives on earth to them.

II. In connection with this sign, Abram receives “a more sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter i. 19)—more sure, or more clear and plain—more explicit and unequivocal.

The actual sight of the divine glory, illustriously displayed in the acceptance of the divinely-appointed sacrifice, confirms the believer’s hope of the glory hereafter to be revealed. But it does so merely in the way of argument or inference. From the glory which he has seen already manifested, he concludes that a fuller manifestation of the same glory may be fairly anticipated—not as a fable or a dream, but as what has already been proved to be a reality. The word of prophecy, however, is more express. It not merely furnishes a presumption that so it well may be, or that so it probably must be—it gives

positive information that so it shall be. Hence the apostle calls it a more sure word of prophecy. Such word of prophecy, accordingly, Abram on this occasion received. It was a word that spoke to him of hope deferred ; but not of that “hope deferred” which “maketh the heart sick ;” for it was none other than the hope which maketh not ashamed ;—the hope that is full of immortality.

Observe the sure word of prophecy in this connection ; as it affects the church or people of God generally, and as it affects Abraham himself individually. Mark how the hope is deferred, but yet not so as to make the heart sick.

1. In reference to his seed after the flesh, and the great nation of which he is destined to be the father, Abram’s hope is deferred (ver. 13, 14). The patriarch is warned against cherishing the expectation of an immediate settlement of his children in the land ; and in so far as his expectation might be supposed to be of a temporal and earthly kind, this could not fail to strike his heart as a hard and cruel disappointment. Even the first instalment, as it were, of his allotted portion or recompense of reward, is not to be bestowed so soon or so easily as he thought. A period of exile, captivity, and oppression, is to intervene before the earliest possession of the land by any people bearing his name. Four hundred years of affliction must pass away before he or his seed can claim any property in the soil, beyond the grave in which his bones are, almost by mere sufferance, to lie.

This is the first instance which the Bible records of chronological prophecy, and considerable difficulty is found in determining the exact epoch intended. Thus there is a question whether the four hundred years should be reckoned from the days of Abram, or from the actual commencement of the Egyptian oppression, out of which the Israelites were rescued by the hand of Moses. And even if we adhere to the commonly received opinion, and consider these four hundred years as including the whole interval which was to elapse between Abram

and Moses, there is still some doubt remaining as to the precise stage in the life of Abram from which we are to begin to count ; a doubt increased by the circumstance of this interval being apparently referred to in other parts of Scripture, sometimes as four hundred years, and sometimes also as four hundred and thirty (Exod. xii. 40 ; Acts vii. 6 ; Gal. iii. 17).

It is unnecessary to enter into these inquiries ; but there is one general remark which it may be useful to make. The matter may not have been by any means so uncertain in that early age, as the perplexities and obscurities of chronological science have since made it ; although even then there might be room for considerable latitude of interpretation beforehand, and it might have been unsafe for any expounder of it, before its actual accomplishment, to undertake to say, within a year, or even several years, at what precise date the deliverance from Egypt might be expected to take place. It was enough that those who groaned under the tyranny of the Pharaoh "who knew not Joseph"—those who continued to wait for the promised salvation—taking this prophecy as their guide, would clearly conclude that the four hundred years were nearly expired when their fiery trial was at the hottest ; and would therefore begin "to lift up their heads, seeing that their redemption was drawing nigh." It must have been some such conviction which led to that exercise of faith "by which Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child ; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment" (Heb. xi. 23). They saw that he was "a proper" or "goodly" child (Exod. ii. 2)—that he was "exceeding fair," or "fair to God" (Acts vii. 20) ; and knowing, by a probable calculation of the four hundred years, that "the time to favour Israel, even the set time, was come," they believed that this goodly child was, or might be, the appointed instrument of deliverance, and by this faith they were encouraged to brave the anger of the king. A similar faith, in regard to the expiry of the appointed period of oppression, might be

cheering the heart of many a devout Israelite in that dark and dreary day of trouble. And cherishing this "sure word of prophecy," given to their father Abraham, they might still persevere "against hope, believing in hope."

It was thus that, in a subsequent age, Daniel drew a similar conclusion from a calculation of the times marked out in preceding prophecy (Dan. ix. 1, 2). It does not appear that he could fix, beforehand, on the very hour, or day, or year, of the predicted restoration of Israel, any more than he could fix on the exact manner of its accomplishment. It was enough that, observing the signs of the times in the light of the prophetic dates, he arrived at the conclusion that deliverance was nigh, even at the door; and thereupon "he set his face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth and ashes" (ver. 3). In this devotional attitude he received that divine message which not only confirmed his own anticipations, but opened up to him a still more blessed prospect of the coming of "the Messiah, the Prince."

So also, in reference to the prophecy given to Abram, it was sufficient to put the church, and all its faithful members, into a posture of expectation and prayer, when the time foretold actually came near. But beyond such a general intimation, it may not have been the design of God to enable any one previously to say at what precise hour the deliverer was to appear.*

* A similar observation may be applied to the prophecies which predicted the era of Christ's first advent, as well as to those which announce events connected with his second coming. Devout men, among our Lord's contemporaries, were found "waiting for the consolation of Israel," and men observant of prophecy and of the signs of the times are now looking out for the dawning of the great day of the Lord. But as it would have been impossible then to settle accurately beforehand the very year or day of the nativity or the crucifixion, so it is surely rash now, to lay down too minutely the journal, as it were, or diary of the eventful and critical times that may be at hand. It is safer in itself, and equally conducive to the cherishing of a right frame of mind, to follow the example of the prophet

2. But while there is hope for his posterity at no very distant period, it might seem that the patriarch himself is excluded from all participation in it ;—"Thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace ; thou shalt be buried in a good old age" (ver. 15). Undoubtedly this is a blessed promise, so far as the circumstances and the manner of Abram's decease are concerned. His death is to be a release from trouble, and an entrance into rest,—the rest of God, into which the godly of ages past have entered ; for such seems to be the import of this touching expression, by which, as if to avoid the raising of a single painful image connected with the coldness and corruption of the tomb, it was customary to indicate the removal of pious friends. They are

"Gone to the resting-place of man,
The universal home ;
Where ages past have gone before,
And ages still must come."

Abram's departure is to be peaceful ; nor is he to depart until he is satisfied with length of days. What more can the righteous man ask ? If he must die before the accomplishment of the Lord's gracious promises respecting the inheritance of the land, what can be more soothing than this assurance ? But that he is to die at all, before that happy consummation, might be a disappointment, or at least a deferring, of his hope ; and had he looked for a portion in the world that now

Daniel. The periods noted in the Revelation of John may be near their fulfilment. Like the parents of Moses, therefore, at the end of the four hundred years, and like Daniel at the close of the seventy, and aged Simeon, when the weeks of Daniel were expiring,—so let the church betake herself to confession and watching and prayer, giving heed to "that sure word of prophecy, which is as a light that shineth in a dark place," not clearly enough, perhaps, to satisfy a speculative curiosity as to the particulars of the approaching sunrise, but yet sufficiently for the exercise of faith and patience, "until the day dawn and the day star" appear, to usher in the glorious morn.

is, it must have been so. Rightly viewed, however, this announcement of his death is a confirmation of his exalted expectations. It shuts him out indeed from all participation in that possession of the land which his descendants, after four hundred years, are to enjoy. Whatever is implied in the promise, "I will give thee this land," it is clearly not to be realised by him on this side of the grave. It stands over as a deed still unexecuted,—a pledge still unredeemed,—a promise still unfulfilled,—a debt still due, when he is buried in a good old age. It cannot be said of him that he has had his reward, or that he has, in his lifetime, received his good things. Much as he has tasted of the Lord's kindness, and seen of the Lord's salvation, he has not got all that he is entitled to claim. The chief and crowning blessing to which God in his sovereign grace has given him a right, still stands over. He has still something more to look for. He may well therefore be reconciled to the prospect of his removal from this earth, which is soon to be burned up, before he has received in it any inheritance. He may be content that his portion should remain to be given to him in the new and better world which is to endure for ever.

3. Nor, even as regards the occupation of the land by his posterity in this present life, if that is an object of desire to him, has the patriarch any cause to complain of the delay which God intimates. In the end, their triumph is on that very account to be the more signal; they are to see their tyrants and taskmasters terribly overthrown, and they are to be themselves greatly enriched (ver. 14); and if there is to be delay, there is a reason stated, which is sufficient at least to satisfy a man of faith;—"The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full" (ver. 16). The settlement of his descendants in Canaan is to be connected with the execution of the fierce anger of God on the present inhabitants of the land. But when judgment is in question, the Lord will not make haste; nor will the servant, who is of the same spirit with his Master, ask or desire

that he should. On the contrary, he rejoices in the thought of the long-suffering patience of God being extended to its utmost limits ; and it is enough to reconcile him to the prolonged prosperity of the wicked, to be told that the divine forbearance towards them is not yet exhausted, that their day of grace is not ended, that there is still some space for repentance, and a remnant among them who may be saved. Well, therefore, may he consent, on such a ground, that his seed should have to wait. Alas ! they will not have to wait very long after all. Too soon will the iniquity of the Amorites be full. " In the fourth generation " the land will be vacated for its rightful owners. Their patience is not much tried. The wilfulness of the wicked frustrates the forbearance of God, and too speedily brings it to a close. It is but a temporary obstacle which is thus interposed between Abram's children and their destined heritage. They shall early return to possess it.*

* The extent of the inheritance here indicated is wider by far than the territory which the Israelites, even in the days of Solomon's most enlarged empire, ever possessed or governed (ver. 18). From the Nile to the Euphrates it reaches in an unbroken tract, embracing the seats of many races or nations whom the Jews never thoroughly subdued or dislodged (ver. 19-21). How this matter is to be explained is a question of great difficulty, which falls, however, properly within the scope of investigations suggested by the later books of Scripture. Some are inclined to assume a certain degree of vagueness in the prophetic descriptions given beforehand of the extent and limits of the promised inheritance. They distinguish between actual possession and political ascendancy. They hold that, when the actual possession, or inheritance proper, is spoken of, it is always Canaan alone that is defined ; whereas, in a looser sense, inclusive of political influence and power as well as territorial sovereignty, the range of Israel's dominion might be stretched greatly beyond the bounds of his actual occupancy. On the other hand, to those who interpret the reasoning of Paul in the eleventh chapter of the Romans, as holding out the hope of a national conversion and restoration of Israel, as such, in the latter day, it is not wonderful that such a prophecy as this should suggest a different thought. In their view, it seems to imply that, in its full

Such, then, is the substance of the word of prophecy which accompanies the manifestation of the divine glory to Abram on this memorable occasion. And the whole transaction, in the end, takes the form of a most solemn ratification of an irrevocable covenant. For that is the principal import of the movement made by the symbol of the divine presence between the portions of the slaughtered victims (ver. 17, 18).

To this manner of confirming a covenant, the Lord, by the mouth of the Prophet Jeremiah, alludes when he indignantly reproves the men who had "transgressed his covenant, and had not performed the words of the covenant, which they had made before him, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof, the princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf" (Jer. xxxiv. 18, 19). It was customary thus to "make a covenant by sacrifice," the parties in the covenant passing between the limbs of the animals which had been slain and divided; and hence, in the present instance, the Lord himself condescends to adopt this significant method of conveying assurance to Abram. He gives a pledge of his favour and his faithfulness in immediate connection with the shedding of blood and the offering of a propitiation for sin. And Abram, as the sun goes down, sees the sacrifice which he has saved from the devouring birds of prey, graciously accepted by the great God of heaven, and made the seal of his own heavenly hope, and of the inheritance to be bestowed upon his seed.

extent, the inheritance remains still to be bestowed upon the seed of Abram; and that the nation, of which Abram was the father after the flesh, is literally to be put in possession of the whole wide dominion which these promises seem to convey. From Egypt eastward to the Babylonian plain,—from the shores of the Mediterranean into which the mouths of the Nile empty themselves, to the gulph which receives the waters of the Euphrates,—all is to be given to the seed of Abram.

XVIII.

THE TRIAL OF FAITH—ITS INFIRMITY.

GENESIS xvi.

Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?—GALATIANS iii. 3.

And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait; let us fall now into the hand of the Lord, (for his mercies are great,) and let me not fall into the hand of man.—2 SAMUEL xxiv. 14.

THE incidents recorded in this chapter form but a melancholy sequel to the preceding. The juxtaposition is one which an uninspired historian would probably have disguised, and which a mere fabulist would certainly have avoided. It seems strange and sad, that immediately after that remarkable scene in which the warrant of Abram's faith, and the sufficiency of it, are so expressly recorded,—in which we find the patriarch so unreservedly reposing in simple and honourable reliance on the divine word, and the Lord, on the other hand, condescending to give to him so explicit an assurance of his acceptance, and such sure and infallible tokens for good,—the very first circumstance related of him should be his falling into sin,—and that the sin of unbelief. But obnoxious as it may be to the cavils of the unreflecting and the ill-disposed,—and abused, as perhaps it has been, by not a few of the unlearned and unstable who wrest this, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction,—the narrative is full of profit. In its origin, nature, and results, this sin of Abram may read us many salutary lessons.

I. It originated at such a time and in such a manner as may well enforce the solemn warning, "let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall;"—while it painfully illustrates that other affecting saying, that "a man's worst foes may be those of his own household."

The patriarch's wife was undoubtedly a godly woman. She is commended as such by the Apostle Peter (1 Pet. iii. 6), who makes her an example to all Christian matrons; they are her daughters as long as they do well. She "obeyed Abraham, calling him lord." With him, she came out from among her kindred, and was willing to lead the life of a stranger and pilgrim. During all the time they had spent in the land of Canaan, she was constantly and faithfully with her husband, sharing his trials, and witnessing the great things which the Lord did for him. If, on one occasion, she became too readily a partaker of his sin, when she went into that plan of passing for his sister to which she had wellnigh fallen a victim,—she then experienced, along with her husband, the vanity and danger of every device of carnal wisdom;—while in the seasonable interposition of God, she received a new proof and pledge of his power to help in the time of need. Nor could the events which followed, marking out the patriarch so unequivocally as the friend of God and the heir of the promise, be lost on his affectionate partner, who herself was heir, together with him, of the grace of life, and by whom his prayers were not wont to be hindered (1 Pet. iii. 7).

Strange and sad, that at such a season, and from such a quarter, temptation should arise; that after a ten years' walk with God, in the very height of privilege, in the full assurance of faith, the faithful companion of his pilgrimage and helper of his joy, should beguile and betray him! After such an instance, who can be secure?—in what circumstances, or on what side, secure? Well may we lay to heart the warning, "Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

II. The temptation itself is a very plausible one. It

bears all the marks of that subtlety which, from of old, has been the characteristic of that old serpent, the devil. Observe the spirit and manner in which the proposal is made by Sarai, and received by Abram. It is plainly such as altogether to preclude the idea of this step being at all analogous to an ordinary instance of sin committed in the indulgence of sensual passion. Most unjustifiable as was the patriarch's conduct, it is not for a moment to be confounded with that of David, for example, whose melancholy fall was caused by the mere unbridled violence of an unlawful appetite. There is no room for the introduction of such an element as this on the occasion of Abram's connection with Hagar. It originated in the suggestion of his faithful wife, and had, for its single object, the fulfilment of the divine promise, whose accomplishment otherwise seemed to be growing every day more manifestly and hopelessly impossible (ver. 1, 2).

The ungodly, indeed, who know but one kind of temptation, and that the lowest, may affect here to indulge in an incredulous smile or sneer. It suits their purpose better to give the narrative an interpretation as gross as their own tastes. Nevertheless, there are temptations of which they have no conception ;—there are more things in the experience of a spiritual man than are dreamed of in their carnal wisdom. They know not, as he knows them, the wiles of the devil. Upon them Satan finds it enough to bring the coarser and more common inducements of his kingdom to bear ;—and hence they can but ill imagine the rage to which he is provoked, and the arts to which he is obliged to have recourse, against those who have escaped, or are escaping, from his nets, and who now serve, or are striving with all their might to serve, another Master. To these last especially, he is compelled to assume the form of an angel of light, and his seduction of them may be expected to be peculiarly artful and refined.

So it was in the case of Abram. The patriarch is assailed

on the very ground of his spiritual privilege and hope. As one accepted in the sight of God, accounted righteous, pardoned, and justified ;—as one also made an heir of God, declared to be personally invested with a title to a glorious inheritance ;—and finally, as one sustaining a public character, ordained to be the father of a great nation, the source of blessing to all the families of the earth ; in all these particulars, Abram is peculiarly and eminently distinguished ; and in respect of them all, he is specially tempted. They are all dependent, let it be remembered, on “one who is to come forth out of his own bowels” —such is the Lord’s express assurance—and still he goes childless. His wife, as she herself represents the matter to him, is barren ; and it would seem that she is contented to acknowledge her barrenness as hopeless, and to acquiesce in it as a dispensation of God. She does not speak angrily or impatiently, as Rachel did to Jacob,—but meekly and submissively she says, “The Lord hath restrained me from bearing.” It is his will ; and his will be done. But surely God can never intend that my barrenness should frustrate his purpose, and make void his promise. There must be some way of getting over this difficulty, and reconciling this apparent inconsistency between the promise that to thee a child is to be born,—in whom, as the great reconciler, thou, and thy posterity, and all the kindreds of men, are to be blessed,—and the providence which allots to thee a barren, and now aged, spouse. There must be some new expedient to be adopted ; some other plan to be tried. It may be that Sarai is to be a mother, as it were, by substitute and by proxy, and is to obtain children by her maid ; according to the custom already common, of which we have sad enough examples afterward in the family of Jacob. This will accomplish the divine word. And if there be any hesitation about the propriety of the course recommended,—may it not be justified by the manners of the age and country sanctioning the usage ; by the entire absence of every grosser motive ;—and by the necessity of the case shutting him up to

some such plan? Such was Abram's temptation. Such also,—of a similar nature, and indeed so far as regards the difficulty of reconciling sense and faith, substantially identical,—was the temptation of Abram's son and Lord. Jesus, in the lonely wilderness, was tempted as the Son of God, with direct and immediate reference throughout, on the part of the tempter, to what the voice of heaven, at his baptism, had declared. "If thou be the Son of God"—is the insidious insinuation of the devil, as if he would provoke him by reproach, or persuade him by flattery. "If thou be," or since thou art, "the Son of God." It is an insolent taunt, or a smooth and fawning hint. If thou be, or since thou art, as the voice declared, the Son of God, use thy power for thine own preservation,—appear in thy glory, as advancing in the clouds of heaven;—assume thy universal empire over all the earth. Make the stones into bread, lest thou perish. Cast thyself from the pinnacle of the temple, as coming gloriously in the air, lest the people despise thee as coming humbly on the earth. Take possession of the world's throne, lest the world give thee nothing but the cross. Thus the Lord was tempted in all points, like as Abram was, yet without Abram's sin. To the Lord, therefore, let us look as our example and our strength, that we may be saved. To Abram let us look as, in this instance, a beacon set before us by God for our warning, lest we perish.

Especially let us be warned against the two sins which are apt to beset us, in the view of our privilege and our hope as believers; presumption and distrust, which, however opposite, are often found together. For there may be a lurking tendency to practical antinomianism in the heart of him who has tasted and seen that the Lord is good; a sort of feeling as if he were a privileged person, raised above ordinary rules and restrictions, and, in difficult emergencies at least, entitled to judge for himself, to exercise a certain kind of discretion, and to take the matter at issue into his own hands. And along with this there may be a degree of impatience and distrust; a

weariness of waiting for the salvation of the Lord ; an undue anxiety, even on the part of him who should be always walking by faith, to “see his signs,” and to have every stumblingblock removed. He is in straits ; troubled and perplexed ; and he casts about for some way of escape. He sees some kind of relief at which he may grasp,—some scheme for retrieving the loss he has sustained,—some decent form of self-indulgence which may dissipate his despondency and minister to his quiet. May he not avail himself of it ? Instead of looking for the deliverance or the good which he needs, as coming at some time still future, he knows not when,—and by some means still to be provided, he knows not how,—may he not arrive at his end by a shorter and more obvious road ? Instead of reckoning, for instance, on the long-deferred fruit of a barren womb, may he not be warranted at last in seeking the desired result by a more natural and usual course ? Then comes the insidious thought, that, as a child of God peculiarly situated, he may take some slight liberty, and claim a certain exemption and immunity from the strict rule of an exemplary walk. So he begins to walk after the flesh ; and too soon he loses the freedom and enlargement of heart which a calm and clear reliance upon heaven inspires, and feels the bitter subjection and enthrallment of a renewed dependence upon earthly resources, and a renewed entanglement in earthly policy.

III. Accordingly, the sequel of this part of Abram’s history is sufficiently sad. Viewed merely as a domestic scene which might be realised in any ordinary household, how true is it to nature ! And how emphatic is the warning which it holds out !

The jealousies, the heart-burnings and mutual reproaches which we now find disturbing the peace of this pious family, are such as might have been anticipated from the course unhappily pursued. That a woman so strangely and suddenly honoured, taken out of her due place and station, and admitted to the rank and privileges of a spouse, should forget herself and become high-minded,—was precisely such conduct as

might have been expected on the part of a slave treated as Hagar was, and having a temper unsubdued and a mind uninstructed as Hagar's probably were. She could not enter into the plan which the heads of the house had formed, or into the reasons and motives which led them to form it. To their servant, if not to themselves, it must have been fraught with a most corrupting tendency ; and it is no wonder that it proved to her a temptation to insolence and insubordination, stronger than she could withstand. Hence Abram and Sarai had the greater sin. Even if they felt that they were at liberty, so far as they themselves were concerned, to do it,—and that they were safe in doing it,—were they not bound to ask how it might affect their dependant, whom they made a party in the transaction ? Was there not, now that the evil was done and its consequences were beginning to appear, too good cause of regret and repentance ?

And what of the effect on the godly pair themselves of the error into which they have fallen ? Sarai, provoked by the frowardness of Hagar, thought that she did well to be angry. She was loud in her reproaches, and spoke indignantly ; —“ My wrong be upon thee :—I have given my maid into thy bosom ; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes : the Lord judge between me and thee ” (ver. 5). Alas ! had she forgotten that all that she complained of was but the fruit of her own device ; and that as she had sowed, so she reaped ? And what is Abram's predicament in so painful a family feud ? Has he, too, in part, and for a time, forgotten what is due to the partner of his pilgrimage and the wife of his youth ? Is he tempted to carry too far his indulgence towards one who is apparently to realise his anxious longing ? And under that natural feeling, has he become less sensitive than otherwise he would have been, in regard to her whom he was bound to honour, and more tolerant of insult shown to her ? We may almost gather something like this from Sarai's complaint.

If it was so, how sad an instance have we here of the difficulty of stopping short when a single doubtful step is once taken? Abram, when he consented to the specious proposal made to him, thought that he was acting disinterestedly and for the best. But other and less worthy motives began to mingle with his better purposes ; and at all events he is now entangled in a net of his own making. He is no longer free : he is the slave of circumstances ; and he is compelled to make the best he can of a painful perplexity and hard necessity ; to do violence to his feelings, perhaps even to his convictions of duty ; and to consent to the degradation and disgrace of one whom, after what has passed, he is surely bound to consider as having strong claims upon his regard.

In this view, the treatment which Hagar received is all the more unjustifiable. The expressions, indeed, used in our translation, give a somewhat exaggerated idea of what she suffered (ver. 6). Strictly interpreted, they denote nothing more than that by Abram's command Hagar was again placed, as a servant, under Sarai's rule, and made to render to her obedience such as might be enforced by just discipline. Still, in all the circumstances, a milder and more generous way of dealing with Hagar might have been expected on the part of those who had themselves occasioned her offence, and might have prevented her from incurring greater guilt. Her flight is not excusable in her ; but surely it is a sad reproach to the godly family from which she is provoked to fly.

IV. In the wilderness the fugitive meets with a better friend. She wanders on in her solitary way, weary of the heat and toil of travel, and half repenting of the hasty step she has taken. At last she sits down beside one of those fountains of water which, with their little spots of freshness around them, form the grateful resting-places for the worn and fainting traveller in the desert, as the burning sun beats on his aching head, or the shades of evening invite his exhausted limbs to rest. There, as she meditates at leisure, and alone, the excite-

ment of angry strife having passed away, many bitter thoughts crowd upon her mind. The pride which sustained her is gone, and her spirit is mortified and tamed. She cannot now find support in justifying herself and blaming others ; her sin has found her out ; and her heart is beginning to yearn towards the home in which she has dwelt so long in peace, and which, for all that had passed, might still, through God's mercy, and the mutual forgiveness and forbearance of his erring servants, have proved to her a refuge of holy tranquillity and repose. While feelings like these, perhaps, are swelling her bosom and dimming her eye, a heavenly stranger unexpectedly stands beside her, and a heavenly voice reaches her ear. Trained in the household of one familiar with such divine fellowship, Hagar easily recognises the Angel of the Lord ; the Being of whose visits she has heard her master speak. Hence she is not dismayed, although the appeal is one that seems only, in the first place, to convince her of her sin ;—"Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou?" and then, secondly, to point out to her the utter helplessness of her state ;—"and whither wilt thou go?" (ver. 8). Thus the Angel remonstrates with her as to the unwarrantable nature of her conduct, reminding her of her duty, as Sarai's maid, and causing her to feel how thoroughly she is now at a loss. Nor does Hagar resent the charge, or disguise the straits to which she is reduced. "I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai" is her frank acknowledgment, without one plea of self-justification, or any complaint even about her forlorn condition. And it moves the compassion of her heavenly friend ;—it is the very frame of mind with which he sympathises, and for which he delights to provide relief. "Return," he says, "to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands" (ver. 9) ;—virtually assuring her of a kind and gracious reception, or at least, of his own support and favour, should it unhappily be otherwise. And to give her still greater encouragement, he opens up to her the prospect of enlargement and prosperity awaiting the race of

which she is to be the mother ; the singular race that, with their wild and warlike spirit of jealous independence, standing aloof from the other families of man, are yet to keep their footing among them all,—to survive many a convulsion and outride many a sweeping storm,—still roaming the same vast plains, fresh and untamed as ever,—their fleet steeds scouring the Arabian sands, and their hands grasping the ready spear and flashing sword,—unsubdued, unsettled, unchanged,—and unchangeable, as it would seem, till the end come.

But the prophetic intimation which is connected with this transaction, as well as the allegorical or figurative meaning which the Apostle Paul attaches to Hagar's history, are brought out more fully in the subsequent narrative, and may at present be passed over. Meanwhile, the moral and spiritual lesson with which this incident ends is striking and affecting.

Hagar gratefully acknowledges the interposition of God, as a very present help in trouble. "She calls the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou, God, seest me,"—"thou regardest the low estate of thy handmaiden." And she dwells on the seasonable and unlooked for promptness of the help afforded,—“Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?” (ver. 13). Was I looking out for him? Or did his gracious providence surprise me, and his gracious eye almost startle me, when he sought out one, alas! too far gone in hardness of heart ever to have thought of seeking him? Truly may the well be called “the well of him that liveth and seeth me,”—of the living God, who looks on my affliction ; and justly may the child be named “Ishmael,” as the token that “the Lord will hear” the cry of the oppressed, and deliver the fainting soul (ver. 11).

Nor is the relenting offender slow in obeying the heavenly command. She has been led out into the wilderness, that the Lord might speak comfortably to her. Fleeing from the face of her fellow-sinners, who could but rudely aggravate, or, at the best, very slightly heal, the hurt they had themselves in-

flicted, she fell into the hands of one who could better treat her case. That she was here savingly converted, may be considered doubtful; although it is a great thing for her to speak of "Him that liveth, and seeth her." At all events, she is to abide a little longer in the household of faith, and to have an interest in the promise and the seal of the covenant. She returns, therefore, to the home she had forsaken, herself softened, and with an experience to tell that may soften her bitterest enemy. But her mistress is not her enemy, although misunderstanding may have arisen, and, alas! may arise again. The meeting may be supposed to be happy; and over the reconciled household, in which the wounds of sin are for the present closed, we may allow the mantle of hope and charity to drop.

XIX.

THE REVIVAL OF FAITH—THE REPETITION
OF THE CALL.

GEN. xvii. 1.

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord ; and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down : for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.—PSALM xxxvii. 23, 24.

A NEW scene here opens before us—a new era in the patriarch's life. An interval of thirteen years is passed over in silence ; but, alas ! the silence is only too significant. Thirteen years ago Abram is seen to fall from his steadfastness ; and now, for the first time, does he seem to be completely restored and revived. That he was altogether abandoned, during so long a period, it would be unreasonable to believe ; the painful narrative of his sin and sorrow does not close without, at least, a partial glimpse of better things. The Lord has marked, with his unslumbering eye, the whole transaction ; he has arrested the flight of Hagar ; and in the restoration of comparative peace to this troubled household, in the preservation to the patriarch of the child for whom he longed so impatiently, and in the prospects held out respecting that child,—the Lord's hand bringing good out of evil, and graciously turning away from his servants the natural consequences of their own sins, is signally apparent. Still, the issue of that sad story is unsatisfactory. The patriarch, it would seem, is left very much to himself. No signal judgments, indeed, overtake him ; but neither is he visited with any remarkable mercy, or any special instance of the divine favour.

In this doubtful calm, what is the patriarch's spiritual condition? How fares it with his soul? Is it prospering and in health? Or, is he saying,—Soul, take thine ease? Possibly the renewed enjoyment of domestic tranquillity, the increase of his worldly substance, his growing influence and reputation among the chieftains of the land, and, above all, the happiness that he now felt as a father,—in the supposed fulfilment of his long-deferred hope, and in the fresh light and love with which childhood's unconscious gladness ever fills a home,—all together might tend to lull his watchfulness asleep on the lap of a certain languid and luxurious repose, such as even piety itself might be tempted not to disown. He had got, as it has been well said, if not the very thing promised, at least something very like it; and he almost ceased to look or long very earnestly for more. In such a state, how great the need of such a revival as Abram now experiences; receiving, as he does, a repetition of his original call, as preparatory to a renewal of the covenant.

I. He saw the Lord again, and heard his voice calling him, as it were anew. “The LORD appeared unto Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God” (ver. 1).

In this way the sinner is awakened at first. He is going to Damascus on some errand of his own, or of his master's, the prince of this world;—unconsciously, perhaps, walking contrary to God and opposing the Lord Jesus; dishonouring his name and persecuting his people. Suddenly a great light shines around him, and a loud voice reaches his ear; a light great—not outwardly, perhaps, but within, God shining into the heart, and giving the light of the knowledge of his own glory in the face of Jesus Christ;—a voice loud—not in the ear of sense, but in that of conscience, on which it strikes as a knell, breaking the very slumber of the grave—“Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” The sinner sees for the first time the real character of the God with whom he has to do, as the Holy

One and the Just, the great and terrible God, as well as also the God whose name is love. He hears, uttered in thunder, the inexorable threatenings of the law ; while in accents of tenderest persuasion, the gracious but peremptory call of the Gospel moves and melts his inmost soul. He falls on his face, and when he rises he is a new man. "Who art thou, Lord?" is his eager question. "I am He whom thou persecutest"—"I am the Almighty God," is the reply that goes to his heart.

Precisely similar is the process of revival in the soul on which sin and the world have been exerting their blighting and benumbing influence. The Spirit opens the eye anew to behold God in his glory standing very near. He opens the ear to hear God speaking home to the conscience, as one having authority ;—"I am the Almighty God ; walk before me, and be thou perfect."

II. Abram is called to be "perfect." Now, this word "perfect," or "upright," when applied to man, in the Bible, is not absolute, but relative. It relates, for the most part, not to the whole character of a man, but to some one particular feature of his character, some individual grace or virtue specified, in respect of which he is said to be complete or entire, consistent and sincere.* In the instance before us, it is the duty of

* Instances of this use of the word are frequent in the Psalms. Thus, in the 32d Psalm, the righteousness or uprightness mentioned, has reference to the single duty of confessing sin to God (ver. 1-5) ; and denotes freedom from guile, or the unreserved openness of a heart unburthening itself, in the full and frank confidence of faith, to God. In the 64th Psalm, the particular in respect of which perfection is ascribed to the man of God (ver. 5), is his inoffensive demeanour towards his enemies,—the same particular which is referred to likewise in the 7th Psalm ; where also the Psalmist appeals to his integrity in the same connection (ver. 4, 5, 8). So again in the 139th Psalm, the Psalmist challenges to himself perfection, as a hater of those who hate God (ver. 22), hating them as God hates them, not personally, but for their wickedness' sake ; and hating them, in that sense, perfectly, with no secret reserve in favour of what may be agreeable or amiable in their sins,—no complacency in their company, nor any love

“walking before God,” in respect of which Abram is exhorted to be perfect ;—“Walk before me, and be thou perfect.”

To walk before God, is to walk or live as in his sight, and under his special inspection : to realise, at all times, his presence and his providence ; to feel his open and unslumbering eye ever upon us. To walk thus before God is impossible, if there be not redeeming love on his part, apprehended by faith on our part ; and to be perfect, guileless, and upright, in thus walking before God, is the great duty of the believer. He alone can discharge that duty. Others do not like to retain God in their knowledge ; they have comfort only when all serious thought of God is got rid of, and put aside ; and so they hide themselves from God amid secular vanities or sacred formalities. Their walk is not, and cannot be, in good faith, a walk before God, or with God, under his eye and subject to his control. But as to his own people,—why should they not walk before God ? Why should they not, with entire openness and uprightness, so walk ? Why should they shrink from so close a fellowship with God as such a walk implies ? Having peace with him, and making it their single aim to be like him—why should they not be perfect in such a walk ?

Alas ! for the unsteadfastness of faith, and the deceitfulness of sin ! The believer becomes involved in some device of worldly wisdom ; or he casts his eye along some forbidden path, on which he would venture but a few exploring steps ; or he is

of their conversation. In the same manner, in the 101st Psalm, where the Psalmist speaks of walking in a perfect way and with a perfect heart, he simply avows his determination, with unsparing and uncompromising impartiality, to discourage vice and countenance holiness, in the ordering of his household and the ruling of his court and kingdom. (See also Ps. lxxv.) And finally, in the preparation for the building of the temple (1 Chron. xxix. 9), David and the people are said to offer gifts to the Lord “with perfect heart,” that is, with a heart perfect, in regard to this act of liberality, as an act springing from no unworthy motives, but done with a single eye to the glory of God. (So also in Matt. v. 48.)

tempted to take the measuring of his duty and the ordering of his lot into his own hands ; or he falls under the spell of an indolent self-sufficiency. In some particular or other he compromises his integrity ; and in the state of his affections or the habit of his life, there is something as to which he has not come to a clear and open understanding with God as his Father and his Friend. Then the hidden life of the soul begins to be disordered and deranged ; the walk before God becomes unsteady and uncertain ; the consciousness of something lying unadjusted between the conscience and its only Lord, creates uneasiness, suspicion, and reserve ; there is guile in the spirit ; and the fruit of guile is distance and distrust. The heart ceasing to be right with God, the walk is no longer upright before him.

So was it probably with Abram, when the loud call again aroused him, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect." Be thyself again ;—return and do thy first works. Be perfect,—perfect in thy walk before me ;—perfect as in the day when, with entire and unsuspecting confidence, thou camest forth out of thy father-land, not knowing, nor even asking, whither I was bringing thee ;—perfect as in the night when I led thee forth under the starry heavens, and when upon my bare word, "So shall thy seed be," thou didst believe, and wast justified in believing. Be perfect,—not in any high or strange accomplishment, but in that in which a little child is the best specimen of perfection—in simply believing, trusting, confiding. Be perfect in walking before me, as a child may walk under the eye of parental watchfulness and love. That is perfection,—the perfection of walking before a father. No unbelief is there,—no selfishness, no reserve, no feeling of a separate interest, no secret consciousness of a double mind, or a divided heart, or an evil eye. Be thou thus perfect in thy walk before me.

III. Abram has a sufficient reason given to him for compliance with the command. It is a reason founded on the nature of God himself. God appeals to his omnipotence, as

warranting his expectation that his servant's walk before him should be perfect ;—"I am the Almighty God." This is thine encouragement to act with entire frankness and unreserve in all thy dealings with me, and to let all be open and undisguised between us. I have all power and all sufficiency ; and all that concerns thee may be safely left to me. There is no need of any underhand or circuitous procedure, nor any occasion to resort to any doubtful walk of thine own for the accomplishment of all that thy heart desires. I am the Almighty God ; walk before me. Commit thy way to me, and I will bring it to pass. What is it that troubles thee, and would tempt thee to try some device of thine own for relief ? Is it sin ? Go not in any path of deceitful compromise, making a false truce with thine own conscience ; walk before me, and be perfect. Let thy sin, in all its blackness, be laid bare before me ; for I am the Almighty God ; I have a provision such as no resources but mine could furnish—a provision of infinite wisdom, power, and love, by which I freely cleanse thee from it all. Or is it that thy hope is deferred, and thy way is hid from the Lord ? "Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary ? There is no searching of his understanding." He is the Almighty God ; walk before him with perfect simplicity in thyself, and perfect reliance upon him. Take nothing into thine own management ; leave all to him. Nor be discouraged, or tempted to grow weary because of the way. "He giveth power to the faint ; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall : But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength ; they shall mount up with wings as eagles ; they shall run, and not be weary ; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isa. xl. 29–31).

Thus did God appear to Abram, by the name of God Almighty ;—the name, as we have seen, most appropriate when he claims the confidence of his people, in giving exceeding

great and precious promises, as the name Jehovah is the more significant when he is about to fulfil them (Exod. vi. 3). In promising, he appeals to his omnipotence ; in fulfilling, to his unchangeableness. As God Almighty, able to do whatsoever he says, he calls to a perfect walk before him. As Jehovah, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, he gives warrant for a patient waiting upon him, till all be accomplished. In the one character, God summons you to begin, or to begin anew, your course. In the other, he encourages you to hold on unto the end.

Thus the patriarch is called to be himself again,—seeing the Lord by faith as he really is,—emancipating himself from all guile in his spirit,—entering into the favour and fellowship of the Holy One,—and relying, as before, with implicit, unquestioning, and childlike confidence, on the almighty arm of him who can make all things work together for good, and bring the wanderer at last, after all the trials of sense and sin, into his own everlasting kingdom and glory.

XX.

THE RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT.

GEN. XVII. 2-8.

THE repetition of the call leads to a renewal of the covenant ; and this accordingly is the fitting sequel of Abram's revival from the state of carnal peace and security into which he had been falling.

For ascertaining the import of the covenant as here renewed, the Apostle Paul is to be consulted. He is the best expounder of it ; and he has given us no doubtful interpretation.

Thus, in the first place, in his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul refers to the seventh verse of this chapter of Genesis ;—“ And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee ” (ver. 7). The seed here spoken of, Paul expressly and very pointedly identifies with Christ, and with Christ alone ; “ to Abraham and his seed were the promises made ; ” to his seed ; for special notice is taken by the apostle of the word being in the singular number, and much stress is laid on that circumstance ; “ He saith not, And to seeds, as of many ; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” The covenant, therefore, is not with many, but with one, even with Christ. It embraces others, besides Christ, only as they are identified with him. On this footing Abraham himself is accepted, as being one with his seed, which is Christ. Christ, and all who, like Abraham, believe in him, are accounted one, being in the

Spirit really one. To Christ, then, as the seed of Abraham, are the promises of this covenant made; to Christ alone; to none but Christ (Gal. iii. 16).

Again, secondly, in regard to the assurance,—“Thou shalt be a father of many nations,”—which is repeated three several times in this renewal of the covenant (ver. 4, 5, 6), and is connected with the significant change of the patriarch’s name, from “Abram,” or “exalted father,” to “Abraham,” or “father of a multitude” (ver. 5)—the apostle, writing to the Romans, unequivocally interprets this promise, as referring, not to the natural posterity of Abraham, but to his spiritual family—to those, who, being of faith, are the children of faithful Abraham. Over and over again, he speaks of the promise which was confirmed by the seal of circumcision—that is, this very promise before us—as being a promise that Abraham “was to be the father of all them that believe;” even of those “who walk in the steps of that faith which he had,” before his circumcision. And still more particularly, he founds upon this very view of the promise, an argument to prove that it cannot be a promise of the legal covenant, for then it would be limited to his posterity who were under that covenant. “Therefore,” he concludes, it is not of the law, but “of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all”—of all who believe, whether of the law, or not,—“as it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations.” Now this, it is added, was what Abraham believed, on the word of him “who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.” He did so on that memorable night when, as he looked to the stars to which God pointed, “against hope he believed in hope, that so,” even as these stars, “was his seed to be;” as well as on this subsequent occasion also, when he was expressly told that he was to become “the father of many nations.” Most plainly, therefore,

the Spirit testifies, that both of these assurances,—that which the starry heavens were summoned by God to attest, and that of which the sign of circumcision was appointed to be the seal,—both the promise—“so shall thy seed be,”—and that other promise—“thou shalt be a father of many nations,”—were received, understood, and believed by Abraham, as referring to the multitude of his spiritual children—the innumerable company of believers of whom he is the father (Rom. iv. 11-18).

Once more, in the third place, Paul cites and explains the promise in this renewal of the covenant as to the inheritance of the land, or the world (ver. 8); and says of it exactly what he says of the promise respecting the number of the seed,—that it “was not through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” Now this excludes the possibility of the promise having reference to the possession of Canaan by the Israelites, from the days of Joshua till their last dispersion. Their occupation of the land during that whole period was really, whatever the ideal of it might be, “through the law;” it was on the terms of that legal dispensation, under which, as a nation, they were placed. Receiving the land, as they doubtless did, by an act of mere grace on the part of God, they practically held it on the condition of their own obedience; being, as it were, tenants upon their good behaviour. But, says the apostle, the inheritance promised to Abraham, and to his seed, was “through the righteousness of faith;” on the terms of that other covenant, not of works, but of grace, in which a righteousness is provided that is to be received by faith alone. To whatever inheritance, then, this promise may refer, it is at least clear that it cannot have received its fulfilment in the past history of Israel and of Canaan (Rom. iv. 13).

Now, taking together the three principles of interpretation suggested by the Apostle Paul, we may safely conclude that the promises of the covenant, as here renewed to Abraham, are not temporal and worldly, but wholly spiritual and eternal; having respect to Christ, the true spiritual seed of Abraham,

and to the spiritual offspring or family of Abraham, the faithful of many nations who are all one in Christ, though they are as the stars of heaven for multitude, and who are all in Christ called to the hope of an everlasting inheritance. So these promises are understood by Paul ; and so they must have been understood by Abraham, taught as he was by the same Spirit.

How comprehensive, then, is this covenant ? With what admirable fulness does it open up to us the number, the privilege, and the hope of believers !

First, the number or extent of the true Church of God is largely set forth ; and on this particular special stress is laid. It forms, indeed, the main or leading promise of the covenant, being repeated frequently in different words, and with great earnestness ;—"I will multiply thee exceedingly ;"—"Thou shalt be a father of many nations ;"—"A father of many nations have I made thee ;"—"I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee." To this, also, the change of the patriarch's name from Abram to Abraham applies, being a pledge or token of the vast and varied host that were to hail him as their sire. The assurance is peculiarly well timed, and well fitted to quicken and sustain his spiritual faith. What does he see before him ? Not a long line of earthly monarchs, and a great variety of earthly communities, all tracing their natural descent from him as their common ancestor ; but "a great multitude which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues," gathered into one in Christ ; all justified like himself by faith, and all rejoicing to be called his children, and to be blessed as such along with him. He "saw the day of Christ afar off," and in Christ he saw the exceeding increase and fruitfulness of the great household of faith ; the countless host of the elect, gathered into one out of all nations, united in the same holy faith and heavenly fellowship with himself ; and finally, nations themselves and their kings converted to the

knowledge of the Saviour in whom he believed, and so becoming his children indeed. What a prospect, to revive, elevate, and ennoble the patriarch ; to break every worldly and carnal spell ; to make the eye of his spiritual faith beam keen, and the pulse of his spiritual life beat warm and high and strong !

Secondly, the privilege of the patriarch's believing children is precious and peculiar, and throughout all ages it is one and the same. He who appeared to Abraham is to be their God ; for he says :—" I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (ver. 7). God is to stand to them in a peculiar relation—the very relation in which he stands to him who is pre-eminently the Seed of Abraham. For it is in respect of their being one with that ONE SEED that they all enjoy this privilege. There may be many nations of them, and many generations ; but still the seed is one ; Christ is one, and they all are one in him alone. Hence the emphasis of this blessed promise, as applicable to all the faithful, in all ages, and of every clime. Its whole value lies in its primary application to Christ ;—" I will be a God to him who is truly thy seed." Thence, by necessary inference, it follows, that to all who through grace are made one with him, and so become thy seed in spirit and in truth,—and to thee also as one with him,—I will be a God ; in precisely the same sense in which I am to be a God to him who is my beloved Son, and in whom I am ever well pleased. Well, therefore, might that holy and elect one, with whom the covenant was really made, appeal to its promise in his last prayer ; and, in terms of it, at least virtually, plead for all his believing people, as every where and always one in him. Well might he speak of the Father as loving them with the very same fulness of everlasting love with which he loves him. Most wondrous measure of the Father's love to you who believe ! Hear these blessed words of the seed of Abraham : "Thou hast loved them as thou hast

loved me." Who shall tell what love that is which the Father has to his own Son? Who shall estimate,—who shall exhaust it? And yet in respect of it all, they are one with him! How close, then, must be the union between those who, being of faith, are the children of Abraham, and that one Seed of Abraham in whom they all believe!—how complete their identity in respect of their joint relation to God, "as his Father and their Father, his God and their God!"

Still further, thirdly, the hope set before the spiritual seed of Abram is high and heavenly; it is none other than the hope of glory. It is true, the promise might seem literally to point to an earthly inheritance;—"I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (ver. 8). But that it has a reference to something beyond, is plain from the very terms in which it is conveyed. Abraham himself, let it be observed, has an interest in the promise,—he has personally a vested right in the inheritance, whatever it may be. "I will give it to thee"—is the unambiguous and unequivocal phraseology of the grant. Then, again, the land is said to be given "for an everlasting possession," not for a temporary occupation merely. And, above all, the crown and consummation of the whole promise would indicate something far higher and greater than ever was realised during the sojourn of the Jews in the land;—"I will be their God." For we must never overlook the inference which our Lord has taught us to draw from this expression, when addressed to men living in the body;—"I will be their God"—their God, as they are now, in the body. They may individually die, generation after generation may depart, and their bodies may moulder in the dust. But the promise stands sure, as belonging, not to their disembodied spirits, but to themselves as they were when they received it, in their compound nature, body and soul united;—it is due, not to the dead, but to the living. And the apostle, it is to be remembered, has

put the matter beyond a doubt. He interprets the promise as comprehensive of the world generally, or as a promise that "Abraham should be the heir of the world;"—not of the land, but of the world,—for the original term here used is unambiguous (Rom. iv. 13);—and he places it on a footing that will not at all agree with any mere settlement of Israel in Canaan. Moreover, in the same passage, and in immediate connection with this very promise, he seems to make a most remarkable allusion to Abraham's faith in God as raising the dead (Rom. iv. 17). He specifies two instances of divine power, both of which Abraham believed, and the belief of which would seem to be essential to his embracing the promise made to him of a numerous offspring, and an everlasting inheritance. He believed that "God could quicken the dead," and that he could "call into being things which, as yet, were not." The latter power God must put forth, in order to Abraham's having a numerous offspring; both naturally, through the child of promise, as yet unborn, and his children after the flesh; and spiritually, through his seed, which is Christ, to whom a people are to be given by the Father. What need of the former, or the power to quicken the dead, being so pointedly referred to, unless the resurrection be an event involved in the grant of the inheritance? And if so, it must needs be the inheritance of heaven,—the only inheritance which lies beyond death and the grave.

Taking these considerations together, we may conclude that the hope set before Abraham in this covenant is the very hope of the resurrection for which, ages after, Paul was called in question. That, for himself, Abraham looked forward to a better land than the land whose soil he trod as a stranger,—that he looked for a heavenly country,—is beyond all question. He must, therefore, have understood the promise of the land of Canaan as given to him individually, in a spiritual and heavenly sense. It is possible, indeed, as before hinted, that that sense may turn out to be more strictly literal than is often

supposed ; if, as some think, and as is not improbable, the scene of the future heaven, the local habitation of the blessed, is to be this very earth, renovated and purified by fire. On that supposition, the meek shall literally inherit the earth ; and Abraham, and his children in the faith, are yet to be the heirs of the world, and especially of that most hallowed spot of the world, where he who was pre-eminently the seed of Abraham died and rose again. But however this may be, Abraham most certainly saw in this promise the hope of an inheritance with God, to be reached by a resurrection from the dead ; “an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.”

Compared with this inheritance to be possessed for ever by himself and by all like-minded with himself ; and to be possessed by them all as one with the true seed, “heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ ;”—compared with this, how poor the prospect of the occupation of Canaan for a few brief centuries. by a nation,—all born of him, it is true, but, alas ! not all partakers of that faith by which alone he was justified, and by which alone either he or they could be saved. That, assuredly, was not the hope of Abraham’s calling. No. He lived by the power of the world to come ; he rejoiced in hope of the glory to be revealed ; and in this renewal of the covenant he had his eye directed to no earthly prize, but to heaven itself, and to God as constituting the blessedness of heaven,—or, in a word, to the full enjoyment of God as his own and his children’s portion for ever.

Such were the promises given for the revival of Abraham’s faith. And what could be better fitted for that end ? What objects of holy contemplation are here presented to Abraham ! The countless multitude of his believing children, and their unity in him who is the true seed ; the near relation in which God stands to this true seed, and to all that are one in him ; and the glorious and eternal inheritance, of which, through the resurrection from the dead, a lively hope is given ;—these are

the elements of that spiritual food, that heavenly manna, by which the soul of believing Abraham is fed and refreshed. Such truths as these brought home to his heart anew, must recall his affections from earth, and fix them once more on God. His spirit is refreshed and quickened ; his faith is re-animated ; his hope is brightened ; his first love burns again. And when the Lord "leaves off talking with him and goes up from him,"—it is with a fresh and glad appropriation of the opening assurance "I am the Almighty God," that Abraham sets himself, in all singleness of eye and earnestness of soul, to a hearty compliance with the command, "Walk before me and be thou perfect."

XXI.

THE SEAL OF THE COVENANT—THE SACRAMENT
OF CIRCUMCISION.

GENESIS XVII.

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.—ROMANS iv. 11.

THE call and the covenant renewed, as has been seen, most graciously to Abraham, are ratified on this occasion by the additional confirmation of a sacramental pledge.

The nature of a sacrament in general, and of this sacrament in particular, is carefully defined by the Apostle Paul (Rom. iv. 9-11.) Three things are distinguished by him;—the righteousness, the faith, and the seal.

The righteousness is that which is all throughout Scripture called “the righteousness of God” (Isaiah xlv. 12, 13 ; li. 5 ; Rom. i. 17 ; x. 3). It is that perfect and all-sufficient righteousness, which consists of the voluntary obedience and atoning sufferings of his own beloved son ;—or, rather, of the very person of the Son himself, as manifested in our nature, and satisfying on our behalf the righteous claims of the law, being the Lamb of God and the propitiation for the sins of the world. It is the righteousness which God has provided in his Son,—and of which he is pleased to accept,—as the exclusive ground of a sinner’s justification in his sight.

The faith, again, is that “believing with the heart unto righteousness” (Rom. x. 10), or that cordial appropriation of

this very righteousness of God, which brings the sinner near, and places him on a right footing with God.

The seal, which comes last, is something different from both. It is added as a token or pledge, a confirmation and assurance of the covenant-transaction with which it is associated. It does not itself constitute or make the covenant on the part of God. Nor is it that which, on my part, gives me an interest in the covenant. What makes the covenant, as the ground or reason of it, is the righteousness of God. What gives me an interest, or a personal right and concern in the covenant, is my faith—my simple acceptance of its blessings, or rather of him in whom, as being himself the righteousness of God, its blessings are all treasured up and stored. The affixing of the seal is an after-deed. It assumes, or takes for granted, the validity of the previous transaction. It proceeds upon the supposition, first, of the covenant being itself made and ratified, exclusively on the footing of the perfect righteousness of God ; and, secondly, of its being made over to me, and made practically and personally mine, exclusively through faith. Then comes in the seal, closing, and, if we may so say, crowning and consummating the whole procedure,—the entire negotiation of my peace and my fellowship with God.

According to this view, the expression (Gen. xvii. 10.) “This is my covenant” must be understood as elliptical, and interpreted by the explanation which the Apostle Paul suggests. It cannot be taken absolutely and literally as it stands ; for, in that case, not only is it at variance with all the teaching of Scripture upon the subject, but it has no clear or distinct meaning at all. It is evidently, therefore, a compressed and imperfect phrase, which the intelligent reader is to fill up. For circumcision is not itself the covenant, although in some sense it may be said to be “the keeping” of the covenant. “Thou shalt keep my covenant” says the Lord to Abraham in the preceding verse (ver. 9). And “this is my covenant which ye shall keep between me and you”—this is the keep-

ing of it, or the way in which you are to keep it—"every man-child among you shall be circumcised."*

Many questions of detail, relating to circumcision as the keeping of the covenant, might here be raised, which the brief narrative before us does not enable us, with any certainty, to settle. A few points, however, may be simply noted.

I. As to the time of the appointment of this ordinance, it is important to observe that a visible Church is now to be constituted; a society is to be formed, which is to be separated from the world, consecrated to God, and destined, under different varieties of form and of economy, more or less spiritual, to continue to the end of time. That Church is now to stand out as authoritatively and sacramentally distinct from the world.

Before the flood, a similar distinction began to prevail in the days of Enos;—spontaneously, as it would seem, on the part of men themselves (chap. iv. 26). As the world grew more and more corrupt, the true sons of God drew off from the rest of mankind, and by a peculiar profession and a peculiar walk, were

* It is the same phrase which is used with reference to the New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper;—"This cup is the New Testament," or the new covenant, "in my blood" (1 Cor. xi. 25.) And it is satisfactory to trace so exact a resemblance between the words of institution in the case of these two sacraments. It proves the substantial identity of all the sacraments, as seals of the same covenant,—the covenant of grace. It was that covenant which God confirmed with Abraham; and to it the sacrament of circumcision stood in the same relation in which the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper stand to it now. "This is my covenant." Who does not see here the precise agreement of this mode of expression with the similar phrases—"This is my body,"—"this is my blood,"—"this is my blood of the New Testament," or covenant—"this is the New Testament," or covenant, "in my blood?" These are, as it now appears, the customary and stated terms of a sacramental institution. How unreasonable to torture them into any more mysterious meaning; since they denote, and really can denote, nothing more than the virtual identity which there is always understood to be between the seal and the substance of any solemn deed.

marked out as his. The line of distinction, indeed, separating the visible Church from the ungodly world, was but too precarious and uncertain. In course of time, fellowship was resumed, with most disastrous issue. After the flood, there was at first no visible society distinct from the general mass of men. The worship of God was in every house. And, although, even in the family of Noah himself, the elements of a division between the pious and the profane may be traced, no palpable selection of the one from among the other seems to have taken place. But as corruption again became general, God appointed a new centre, or rallying point, for those whom he would keep from the contagion of idolatry. The call of Abraham was the initial step towards the formation of a visible Church.

Now, to a visible Church, sacramental distinctions and pledges are appropriate. Hence the fitness of the time at which circumcision was instituted. And if we suppose, as we have ventured to do—no intimation of a divine appointment being given—that the association formed in the time of Enos was the act of the godly themselves, we see the reason why a sacrament should be instituted now rather than then. For now, God himself, by his own express authority,—not man by his voluntary choice,—is laying the foundation of a divine society. And, accordingly, he sets his own seal upon it.

II. The rite itself now instituted is not an unmeaning form or ceremony. It is significant of the great leading fact in the covenant of which it is the seal—the extraordinary and miraculous birth of him who is pre-eminently and emphatically the seed of Abraham, the holy child Jesus. It has obvious reference to Abraham's approaching paternity, his having a son, not after the flesh but by promise; and it is the sign and symbol of something peculiar and remarkable in the manner of the birth, as well as of some special purity and holiness in what is to be born. It has respect to the seed about to be begotten. It points to the Messiah, the Saviour about to be manifested as the righteousness of God—himself personally

the very righteousness of God,—not less in his conception and birth than in his obedience unto death. It prefigures his assumption of humanity, in a way securing his exemption from the sinfulness of humanity. For of his miraculous birth as securing the sinlessness of his humanity, its being unstained by any participation in the hereditary guilt and corruption of man, the circumcision of the patriarch, and his house,—especially the circumcision of Isaac, in the view of whose birth the ordinance is instituted, is a fitting type and token.

Hence, perhaps, one reason for circumcision, as the initial or introductory seal of the covenant, being superseded, and another sacrament coming in its place. Circumcision pointed to the future birth of Christ,—his assumption of our nature, pure and perfect. That birth being accomplished, the propriety of circumcision as a sacrament ceases. Any corresponding rite now must be not prospective, but retrospective; not looking forward to the beginning of the Messiah's work as the righteousness of God, when in his birth he was shown to be his Holy One, and his Son, by his miraculous conception in the virgin's womb—but looking back to the end of his work, in his burial, when he was declared to be the Son of God with power, by his resurrection from the grave. Such a rite, accordingly, is Baptism; as explained by the apostle when he says, "We are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. vi. 4). Our baptism signifies our ingrafting into Christ, as not merely born, but buried and risen again. It refers not to his entrance into the world, but to his leaving it. It is the symbol, not of his pure and holy birth merely, but of the purifying and cleansing efficacy of his precious blood shed upon the cross, and the power of his resurrection to life and glory. Abraham and the faithful of old were circumcised into his birth, the redemption being yet future; we are baptized into his death, the redemption being now past. The one

sacrament was an emblem of purity connected with a Saviour to be born ; the other is an emblem of purity connected with a Saviour who "liveth, and was dead, and behold ! is alive for evermore !" Both circumcision and baptism denote the purging of the conscience from dead works, or from the condemnation and corruption of the old nature, through the real and living union of the believer with Christ—with Christ about to come in the flesh, in the one case ;—with Christ already come, in the other.*

III. Hence it appears that it is strictly and properly to the covenant of grace that circumcision, as instituted on this occasion, has respect. It is true that under the Mosaic economy it served a farther purpose. It became a national badge or mark of distinction—the pledge of the national covenant in terms of which God governed the nation of Israel. Even then, however, it did not lose its primary and original significancy. To a spiritually-minded Jew—to one who was an Israelite indeed—it was still the token of the better covenant, and the seal of the righteousness that is by faith. And as at first ordained for Abraham, it had absolutely no other meaning at all. It could have no other. For, in the first place, there is no limitation or restriction of it to the Jewish nation in particular. It is enjoined on Abraham, as the father of many nations ; and on all, generally, who are of his house, or may be embraced, by whatever right, even the right of purchase, within it (ver. 9-13). And, secondly, the covenant with which it stands associated, is not temporal and national, but spiritual and universal. It is the everlasting covenant, in the one seed of Abraham, which is Christ.

* If this view is admitted, it sufficiently explains the language used concerning baptism in connection with Christ's burial and resurrection ; and therefore cuts away the argument for dipping founded on that language ; as if plunging into a watery bath and coming out of it were a fitting imitation of the lying in the new tomb and the glorious rising after three days.

For the reasoning of Paul, in his Epistle to the Galatians, will apply as strongly to the seal, as to the substance, of the covenant made with Abraham (Gal. iii. 15-17). Whatever modification the divine manner of dealing with his people might undergo in the days of Moses—whatever additional stringency of legal restraint might be rendered necessary “because of transgressions,” and whatever additional reference circumcision might consequently come to have to the national Levitical institute—this could not affect its bearing upon the transaction with which alone it stands originally associated. And if that transaction is represented by the apostle as being substantially the covenant of grace “confirmed of God in Christ,”—which the law given four hundred years after could not disannul,—then it follows that the rite of circumcision, which is identified with it, must partake of the same character, and must be viewed as the seal of “the promises made to Abraham and his seed,” which no subsequent economy could ever “make of none effect.”

As the seal, therefore, of the covenant of grace, or of the righteousness that is by faith,—and in that view of it alone,—circumcision is on this occasion ordained. Hence, it must be in the same view of it that it is appointed to be administered to infants (ver. 12), and is made of indispensable obligation (ver. 14). Both of these observations are important in reference to the analogy between circumcision and baptism.

IV. The child, eight days old, was to be circumcised (ver. 12). Why then, we are accustomed to ask, should not children be baptised?

To this question the opponents of infant baptism, among other things, reply, that circumcision was appointed for the Jews as a nation, and was the sign of their peculiar privileges as a nation, which, in consistency with sound principle, might be hereditary, and in fact were so. But grace, they say, is not hereditary; and baptism is the pledge of grace. The answer would be conclusive, so far as to set aside the argument from

analogy, were it well founded in point of fact—were circumcision a mere national distinction, and not, like baptism itself, the seal of a spiritual covenant, and of the very same covenant. But if, on the other hand,—whatever national application of it may have been subsequently made,—circumcision, as given originally to Abraham, had exclusively a spiritual meaning; if it was to Abraham precisely what baptism is to us, the seal of his engrafting into Christ, and as such, was administered to the infants of his house;—why, we may well ask, are the children of God's people now to be placed on a worse footing than in the days of old? Is there any evidence of a change in this respect? On the contrary, did not the Lord specially distinguish little children as the objects of his love, taking them into his arms, and affectionately blessing them? And do not the apostles proceed all along on the principle, that the visible Church is to embrace not only all the faithful, but their children also? Thus Peter (Acts iii. 39) speaks of the promise being to believers and to their children. Paul also (1 Cor. vii. 14) founds an argument on the assumption that the children of a believing parent are not unclean or common, but holy. And we read in the book of Acts (chap. xvi. 33, etc.) of entire households being baptised; the expressions used being such as to render it very unlikely that the little children were excluded. Why, indeed, should they be excluded? Without an express intimation to the contrary, the practice of administering the initiatory seal of the covenant to infants would be kept up, as a matter of course, under the gospel. It required no formal injunction to warrant its continuance; but very explicit authority must be produced to entitle the Church to set it aside.*

* We may use this argument concerning other ordinances of divine appointment,—as, for instance, the Sabbath. The whole burden of the proof lies with those who contend that the Sabbatic ordinance is done away, or that the Lord's day is not the Sabbath. And so is it also in the instance of infant baptism.

But farther, the principle on which the circumcision of infants proceeded is equally applicable to their baptism ;—that principle being substantially the principle of a visible Church. For the permanent continuance as well as for the first formation of such a society, provision must be made. And what provision can be more effectual, than that the children of those who compose it, should, from their very birth, be assumed into its fellowship—reckoned, accounted, treated, and trained as its members—served heirs, if we may so speak, to the privileges and responsibilities of their parents? What can be more thoroughly in accordance with the whole analogy of the providence of God? Does not his ordinary providence exemplify the hereditary transmission,—not indeed of good or evil,—but of the opportunities and probabilities of good and evil? Our obligations, physical, social, and domestic, are largely made and determined for us by our birth; and so also, to a great extent, are the means of fulfilling our obligations. All this must be acknowledged, apart from religion—as affecting, perhaps, and modifying, yet not at all superseding, our personal and individual accountability. And on the very same analogy, a religious brotherhood, destined to be perpetuated from age to age, is divinely formed.

I say divinely formed. For if the visible Church were a mere voluntary association—a union formed by men of their own accord—the idea of a transmitted right, or a transmitted duty, might seem unreasonable and unfair. To make me a member of such a body in my infancy and without my consent, might be held to be an unwarrantable infringement on my freedom of choice. But if the visible Church is God's ordinance there is no absurdity or injustice in the arrangement. If, while yet unconscious, and incapable of consenting, I am enrolled and registered, stamped, and sealed, as one of the household of God, visible on earth; if, with his sanction, and by his authority, I am marked out from the womb as peculiarly his—his, in the same sense in which the Christian

profession of my parents makes them his—his, by privilege, by promise, and by obligation ;—no wrong is done to me, nor is any restriction put on me, more than by the circumstance of my being born in a home of piety and peace, rather than in a haunt of profligacy and crime. If God makes me, by birth, the scion of a noble stock, the child and heir of an illustrious house, then by my birth I am necessarily invested with certain rights and bound to certain duties, in regard to which I have no discretion. When I am old enough to understand my position in society, I find it in a great degree made for me, and not left for me to make. I may refuse to take the place assigned to me ; I may never avail myself of its advantages ; I may never realise my rank, or imbibe the spirit and enter into the high aims of my honourable calling. Still, if I do not live according to my birth, the fault is my own, and my responsibility is great. And still, whether I take advantage of it or not, my birth, as ordered in God's providence, has a meaning which might stand me in good stead, if I so chose and so willed it. So also in regard to circumcision or baptism. If God owns me, by such an initiatory rite, as a member of the society on earth which bears his name, I may never be in reality what that rite signifies me to be ; but not the less on that account has the right a solemn significance. And if afterwards I wilfully disown it, I do so with aggravated guilt, and at my own increased peril ; whereas, on the other hand, owning it, I obtain an ever fresh confirmation of my faith and good hope through grace.

V. On much the same principle on which this initiatory rite is administered to the children of God's people, it is declared to be of indispensable obligation (ver. 14). It is of course the wilful neglect of the ordinance that is here condemned ; and it is condemned as doubly sinful ; implying contempt, both of the authority by which the rite was ordained, and of the grace of which it was the seal. It involved the twofold guilt of disobedience to God's commandment and

disregard of God's covenant. "He hath broken," or made void, "my covenant" (ver. 14). He who thus offended necessarily excluded himself from the society of God's people, and must be held as joining the ranks of the aliens and enemies. He was justly to be "cut off."

What that sentence meant, and how it was to be executed, is not very distinctly said. It would seem to indicate something more than excommunication, to which some have restricted it. The expression is a strong one, and in the Mosaic law it is certainly used to denote the punishment of death (Exod. xxxi. 14). It is possible, however, that before that law, as the national law of Israel, specified death as the ordinary mode of cutting off from the commonwealth, the sentence may have been otherwise carried into effect. But farther, if death is here meant, it is doubtful whether it was to be inflicted by the hand of man or by the immediate visitation of God. The warning, "He shall be cut off from his people," may intimate not the Church's duty, but God's purpose, in respect of the offender. In that age, there is no reason to believe that any crime save murder was made capital in the judicial procedure of men. But vengeance belonged to the Lord; and in constituting a visible Church, and appointing an appropriate seal, he must vindicate the sanctity of his own ordinance against the despisers of his authority and his grace. There is a marked difference between the threatening of death, if that be meant, in the case before us, and the appointment of death as the punishment of murder; (Gen. ix. 6) "Whoso shēddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." That is a far more express recognition of human agency, and a far more unequivocal ordination of it, than this;—"He shall be cut off from his people." It is to be observed also, that in the view of this menace being an intimation rather of the divine purpose than of human duty, so far at least as any physical infliction might be concerned, there is a remarkable correspondence between the penalty here annexed

to the breach of the law of circumcision, and the consequences that are represented as flowing from the sin of the Corinthians in profaning the sacrament of the Lord's Supper ;—"For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1 Cor. xi. 30).

Such, then, is the institution of circumcision, as the seal of the covenant which God made when he gave the promises to Abraham.

The patriarch's compliance with the divine command is recorded in the remaining portion of the chapter. And the narrative brings out the forbearance and abundant grace of God on the one hand, as well as the struggles of lingering unbelief on the other ;—while, in the issue, the triumph of faith appears, as made perfect by works. For it is no easy exercise of obedience that is required of Abraham, to prove and perfect his faith. A revelation awaits him, in the very act of complying with the injunction of God, that may well stagger his spiritual confidence, as it shocks his natural affection. Hitherto, in this renewal of the covenant, nothing has been said as to the line of descent in which it is to be established. Hagar's child is not formally set aside ; the covenant, as yet, is merely established generally in the seed of Abraham ; and the father's affections, despairing of any other son, may still be set on Ishmael. But he must be completely stripped of all confidence in the flesh, and made to live by faith alone. It is not to a son born after the flesh, but to a son by promise, that he is to look. Sarai herself is to receive strength ; and her name accordingly is changed. She is no longer "Sarai," my princess, as if she stood in that honourable relation to her husband alone ; but "Sarah," without limitation,—a princess, or the princess,—the princely mother of those of whom, in Christ, Abraham is the father (ver. 15, 16). The patriarch laughs, and of the laughter Isaac's name is a memorial (ver. 17).

Still there is a momentary revulsion of natural feeling.

His heart clings to Ishmael. The strange announcement of a child yet to be born he can scarcely comprehend or realise. But here is Ishmael? May not he suffice? Why look for another? "O that Ishmael might live before thee" (ver. 18).

It is the last lingering look of sense,—the fond expostulation of the flesh still striving against the spirit. Is not Ishmael here alive before thee? What better can come of Sarah? There is a moment's hesitation; but immediately there is an unreserved acquiescence in the Lord's will and way. Let him save me, let him bless me; not as I would, but as he will; not in my way, but in his own.

Behold here the marvellous condescension of God. He is not offended by the outpouring of Abraham's natural longings and desires. He hears them, and, as far as may be, he meets and answers them. Ishmael is to be blessed, though Isaac still must be the heir;—"As for Ishmael, I have heard thee: I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac" (ver. 20, 21).

What encouragement have we, in this example, to lay aside all reserve in our intercourse with God. Freely and frankly we may unburthen our hearts to him, and unbosom all our grief. We may tell him, as if in confidence, all that we feel and all that we desire. If only there be submission to his will, he is not offended. For he is patient and pitiful. If it be possible, he will let the cup pass; if not, he will mingle some drop of soothing comfort in it; as he did in the case of Abraham.

XXII.

ABRAHAM THE FRIEND OF GOD.

GENESIS XVIII.

He was called the Friend of God.—JAMES ii. 23.

I. THE FRIENDLY VISIT.

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock : if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.—REVELATION iii. 20.

(VERSES 1-8.)

THE opening scene, in this chapter, is full of beauty,—having that peculiar charm which attaches to Eastern nature, and to the olden time. There is a new appearance of the Lord to Abraham, in the place of his ordinary abode, the plains of Mamre,—the plains which belonged to Mamre the Amorite, one of Abraham's allies in the war against the kings (chap. xiv. 13), and which probably on this account bore the original proprietor's name (chap. xiii. 18). Here are pitched the tents of Abraham's household and attendants,—the colony or company, by this time pretty numerous, over which he presides as chief. His own tent occupies a distinguished place among the rest,—standing near the path by which the casual wayfarer may be expected to pass. It is noon ; and Abraham is on the watch for any weary pilgrim, to whom its sultry and scorching heat may make rest and refreshment welcome. This, it may be believed, is his usual practice. The hour of noon, in that hot clime, suspends labour, and compels the exhausted frame to

seek repose. Abraham and his people repair severally to their tents, and make ready the homely meal. But, first, the patriarch takes his place at his tent door, where usually is his seat of authority ; and there he waits to see if any stranger is coming whom it may be his duty and privilege to entertain. Perhaps some of the remnant of the godly, still holding fast their faith amid the abounding iniquity and universal idolatry of the land,—not protected and blessed, as Abraham once was himself, by any pious Melchizedek, but persecuted and cast out by those among whom they dwelt,—may be going about without a home, and may be glad of a day's shelter and a day's food. These the patriarch will delight to honour ; and the recollection of his own early wanderings, as well as his love to them as brethren in the Lord, will open his heart towards them. Thus he sits for a little in the heat of the day in his tent door, not idle, but intent on hospitable thoughts, “not forgetful to entertain strangers.”

On this day he is well rewarded for his hospitality. “He entertains angels unawares” (Heb. xiii. 2). And not all of them created angels, even of the highest order. One, in the progress of this interview, discovers himself to be the Angel of the Covenant—the Lord himself.

While the strangers are yet unknown—having the aspect merely of ordinary travellers—Abraham manifests towards them, not only the somewhat elaborate homage of Eastern courtesy, but the sympathy also of a godly mind. He presses upon them his hospitality, as if their acceptance of it were a personal favour to himself. Water for their wayworn feet—a pleasant shade under which to rest—and a morsel of bread to comfort their hearts,—such are the kindnesses placed at their service. And still further to remove any feeling they might have on the score of encroaching on his liberality, or incurring irksome obligation, the devout patriarch puts his benevolence on the footing of its being not so much his own doing as the Lord's (ver. 5). Nothing, he would say, is due to me ; you

need not consider yourselves to be indebted to me ; all is of God. He has so ordered it that you should chance to come here, and that I should be waiting to help you ; “Therefore are ye come to your servant.”

Can finer or truer delicacy in the conferring of a benefit be imagined ? Ah ! it is godliness, after all, that is the best politeness ; it is the saint who knows best how to be courteous. Other benefactors may be liberal, condescending, familiar. They may try to put the objects of their charity at their ease. Still there is ever something in their bountifulness which pains and depresses, and if it does not offend or degrade, at least inspires a certain sense of humiliation. But the servant of God has the real tact and taste which the work of doing good requires. And the secret is, that he does good as the servant of God. Like Abraham, he feels himself,—and he makes those whom he obliges feel,—that it is truly not a transaction between man and man, implying some greatness or merit on the one side, of which the want may be painfully realised on the other,—but that all is of God, to whom giver and receiver are equally subject, and in whom both are one.

The offer thus frankly made is frankly accepted. There is no empty form or idle ceremony on either side ;—for God’s saints and servants quickly understand one another. At a word, in God’s name, they come together and are at home with one another. What is given in good faith is at once taken in good part. There are no affected declinations or multiplied apologies—no exaggerated professions of humility or gratitude ; but only simple acquiescence ; “So do as thou hast said.”

The hasty preparation which follows is exactly after the oriental fashion. The repast provided for the family will not suffice for these new guests ; but the requisite addition is easily and quickly made. In the true primitive style, all in the house,—the heads as well as the servants of the household,—bestir themselves. Sarah prepares cakes.

Abraham himself fetches a calf, which one of his young men hastens to dress. Butter and milk complete the entertainment, to which the three seeming travellers sit down; Abraham, meanwhile, doing the part of an attentive host, and courteously standing by them, while they eat under the tree (ver. 6-8).

At first he knows not who or what they are whom he is entertaining. But be they who they may, in showing them this kindness, a glow of satisfaction fills his soul. And ere long he begins to discern under their homely appearance, some traces of their heavenly character. They are not of the common class whom business or pleasure brings across his path; they are not like the ordinary inhabitants of the land. Their holy air and holy demeanour cannot be mistaken.

One in particular seems to stand out from the other two, as commanding greater reverence. To him as the chief among them, Abraham had addressed his invitation:—"My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant" (ver. 3). And soon, as the interview goes on, this Holy One reveals his real rank. From the first he conducts the conversation; and he speaks, not as any inferior or subordinate messenger, but as himself, in his own proper person, God. As God he makes a promise which God alone can fulfil (ver. 10, 14). Then again he is expressly called Jehovah (ver. 13); and in his detection of Sarah's secret sin—her unuttered thought of unbelief—he manifests the divine attribute of omniscience. He convinces and reproves, as the Searcher of hearts. Towards the end of the chapter also (ver. 16), it plainly appears, that of the three, who seemed to be men, only two go on to Sodom—the two angels who reach that city at even (chap. xix. 1). The third remains behind with Abraham, and speaks to him as the Lord Jehovah,—“face to face,”—“as a man speaketh to his friend” (Exod. xxxiii. 11).

The three strangers, therefore, whom Abraham entertains,

are none other than Jehovah himself, and two attendant angels. The Second Person in the Trinity,—who bears the double character of God, or the Lord, and of the Messenger of the Covenant, or the Angel of the Lord,—condescends on this occasion to be Abraham's guest, and becomes "known to him in the breaking of bread" (Luke xxiv. 30, 31).

It is a singular instance of condescension—the only recorded instance of the kind before the incarnation. On other occasions, this same illustrious being appeared to the fathers and conversed with them; and meat and drink were brought out to him. But in these cases, he turned the offered banquet into a sacrifice, in the smoke of which he ascended heavenward (Judges vi. 18-24, xiii. 15-21). Here he personally accepts the patriarch's hospitality, and partakes of his fare,—a greater wonder than the other; implying more intimate and gracious friendship,—more unreserved familiarity. He sits under his tree, and shares his common meal.

II. THE FRIENDLY FELLOWSHIP.

The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant. PSALM xxv. 14.

(VERSES 9-17.)

In the progress of the interview, as well as in its commencement, the Lord treats Abraham as a friend. He converses with him familiarly, putting to him a question which a mere stranger in the east would scarcely reckon himself entitled to put. He inquires into his household matters, and asks after Sarah, his wife (ver. 9). Then, in the pains he takes, by reiterated assurances, to confirm the faith of Abraham and overcome the unbelief of Sarah,—in the tone of his simple appeal to divine omnipotence as an answer to every doubt, "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?"—and in his mild but searching reproof of the dissimulation to which the fear of detection led Sarah,—

“Nay, but thou didst laugh,”—in all this, does it not almost seem as if by anticipation we saw Jesus in the midst of his disciples, stretching forth his hand to catch the trembling Peter on the waters,—“O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”—or, after the denial, turning to look on Peter, and melt his soul to penitence and love!

Nor is it unworthy of remark, as an instance of divine grace and condescension, that from this very incident in Sarah's life, the Holy Ghost takes occasion to record her praise. Speaking of “the holy women” who, “in the old time” “trusted in God, adorned themselves with the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price, and were in subjection unto their own husbands,”—the Apostle Peter adds, by way of example,—“Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; whose daughters ye are as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement” (1 Pet. iii. 6). He warns Christian matrons, indeed, against Sarah's great fault,—her “fear of amazement,”—or, in other words, her consternation at the discovery of what was passing in her mind when she “laughed within herself” in the tent-door. For it was that which tempted her to dissemble. The sudden searching of her heart by this mysterious stranger's all-seeing eye disconcerted and alarmed her. She lost her presence of mind,—her guileless integrity—and instead of a frank acknowledgment of the truth, which would have led to her being completely reassured, she had recourse, in her confusion, to an evasion and a lie (ver. 15). But with this exception, she is commended as “doing well;” and she is held up as a model of matronly simplicity and subjection. She found favour in his sight who is not easily provoked;—who does not break the bruised reed, or quench the smoking flax;—who reproves sin, indeed, even in his own people, but at the same time raises up them that fall.

It is chiefly, however, in the close of this interview, that Abraham is treated by God as his friend, being, as it were,

admitted into his deliberations, and consulted in regard to what he is about to do.

The repast being over, the three divine guests arise to depart ; and Abraham bears them company, for a little way, as they turn their faces toward Sodom (ver. 16). Such a farewell compliment on the part of the host accords with the usages of hospitality, and especially with the kindness of brotherly love in the Lord ; and, accordingly, it is sanctioned by the practice of the early Church, as well as by the commendation of John the beloved (Acts xv. 3 ; 3 John 5, 6). By this time, also, Abraham has doubtless discovered who these travellers really are. And it is a singular proof of the intimate terms on which he is permitted to stand with God, that the discovery does not disconcert him. There is no appearance of confusion or alarm, as in the case of Isaiah (chap. vi.), when he saw the Lord ; or in the case of Peter (Luke v. 8), when the vivid sense of his Master's divinity flashed upon his mind. Abraham is calm and self-possessed ; he is at home and at ease in the presence of the Lord and his two heavenly companions. And, as if not presuming to break in upon the disguise which they thought fit to assume, continuing to treat them as ordinary wayfarers,—with true delicacy he suffers them to depart as they came.

Near the door of his tent, however, he overhears a strange consultation among the seeming travellers. One, who has already spoken as the Lord, and manifested the attributes and prerogatives of supreme divinity—detecting, rebuking, and pardoning secret sin—speaks, as it would appear, to the other two. He intimates that while they are to go on—for the purpose, as we shall presently see, of doing his errand to Lot in Sodom—he himself must tarry a little longer, having a communication to make to Abraham (ver. 17-19). Thereafter he announces to them his intention of joining them again, when his confidential business with Abraham is over. He will personally visit and inquire into the guilt of the devoted

cities, the cry of whose iniquity, like the cry of Abel's blood (Gen. iv. 10), or the cry of the labourers defrauded of their hire (James v. 4), hath entered into the ear of the Lord of Sabaoth ;—"The Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me ; and if not, I will know " (ver. 20, 21).

Perhaps these verses (20, 21) are to be taken as retrospective ; as being a parenthetical explanation of this whole scene, which might have been given at the outset, but is now incidentally thrown in :—"The Lord had said, I will go down now and see ;"—speaking after the manner of men, to mark the perfect equity of his procedure, as not condemning hastily, or without inquiry. This had been his purpose in coming down to earth at all on this occasion. In the execution of this purpose he had visited Abraham. And now sending on to Sodom the angels who accompanied him, and who were appointed to save Lot, he himself remains behind.

Thus Abraham stands alone before the Lord. And that marvellous colloquy ensues, in which the Lord communicates his purpose respecting Sodom to Abraham his friend, and Abraham takes upon him, with unprecedented and extraordinary freedom, to speak to the Lord.

III. THE FRIENDLY AND CONFIDENTIAL CONSULTATION.

Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.—AMOS iii. 7.

(VERSES 17-19).

In announcing his intention to communicate his purpose respecting Sodom to Abraham his friend, how strange and singular is the Lord's language (verses 17-19) :—"Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do ?" as if Abraham were

entitled to know it—as if he had a right to be consulted. What condescension! That the sovereign Lord of all, who “giveth not account of any of his matters”—to whom none may say, What doest thou?—should feel himself, as it were, obliged to open his mind to Abraham! “Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?” He speaks as if such concealment would be a wrong not to be thought of—as if it would be unworthy of the relation in which Abraham stands to him;—unworthy of it as a relation of high honour as well as great responsibility.

1. The Lord refers to the honour or privilege already granted to Abraham as a reason for having no concealment from him now—“Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (ver. 18). The rank to which the patriarch has been raised, the prospect of his increasing greatness, and the blessing which in him all nations of the earth are to receive, combine to warrant and explain his admission into the divine confidence and counsels. He is in a position to be trusted. He is not a stranger or an enemy, who must be kept at a distance, and treated with stern and suspicious reserve. He stands high in the favour and fellowship of God, and it is not unreasonable that God should impart to him an intimate knowledge of his works and his ways. “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant” (Ps. xxv. 14). Hence the Lord speaks of his prophets as those who should stand in his counsel, or his secret (Jer. xxiii. 18-22); and again, he says, “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret to his servants, the prophets” (Amos iii. 7). And it is worthy of observation that it is especially with reference to his judgments to be executed on the earth that the Lord thus speaks—such judgments as he is about to bring on Sodom. It is indeed a very peculiar and precious privilege of this divine friendship, thus to understand, from his own previous explanation of them, the

terrible visitations of the Lord. To the friend of God, these visitations of vengeance are not, as they appear to other men, mere accidents of fortune, or sudden outbreaks of capricious wrath. To him they have a clear meaning—a distinct and well-defined end. And hence, while others are distracted and overwhelmed, he stands fearless amid the ruin.

What a privilege is this ! See the ungodly, the worldly, overtaken with swift destruction. Sudden calamity comes upon them ; they are stupified, they stand aghast ; not knowing what to make of the dispensation ; not knowing where to turn. It is a mysterious, an inscrutable providence—is their only cry. What means it ? What shall we do ? But the friend of God is not thus, even in the worst storms, all at sea and unprepared. He can form some idea of the meaning of such visitations ; he can put upon them a right construction, and turn them to a right account. He can glorify God, and kiss the rod ; he can stand in awe, and not sin. So, when the judgments of God are abroad in the earth, and men's hearts begin to fail them for fear, the friend of God, understanding that these things must be—and understanding also why they must be—to prove and to avenge his own elect—can “make his refuge in the shadow of God's wings, until the calamities be overpast” (Ps. lvii. 1). He is not alarmed, or offended, or shaken in his loyalty, by all that he sees God doing on the earth—most unaccountable though many of his doings may be. He has been taken into the divine confidence, so that now he “dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High” (Ps. xci. 1) And “when the Lord cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity,” they who are his friends hear his gracious call, “Come my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee. Hide thyself, as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast” (Isa. xxvi. 20).

2. The Lord, in communicating his purpose to Abraham his friend, refers not only to the high honour and privilege

which that relation implies, but also to its great responsibility—"For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (ver. 19). The same consideration is largely dwelt upon in the seventy-eighth Psalm, as a reason for the recital of the Lord's mercies and judgments which that Psalm contains (ver. 1-8). For the transmission from generation to generation of the true knowledge and worship of God, it is essential that they who are to command and teach their children after them, should themselves understand the scheme of God's providence, so as to be well acquainted with what he has done, and is yet to do, on the earth. Abraham is highly commended by God, as one who will assuredly be faithful in this work of the godly training and godly discipline of his household. As the head of a family—as a witness for God to the generation to come—as a teacher of righteousness, he is intrusted with a most important office, and he will not betray his trust. And that he may the better and more effectually fulfil his trust, the Lord hides not from him that thing which he is doing. He explains to him the coming judgment upon Sodom, and the principle of that judgment. For Abraham is to ply this as a weapon, and use it as an argument, in dealing with those whom he instructs in the ways of the Lord. Hence the value of this announcement made to him beforehand of Sodom's doom. For now he can speak of it, not merely as a historical fact—an event which happened to occur in his day—but as a fact or event having a special significancy, as a predetermined judgment of God. Nor is he to speak of it merely as the result of natural causes, whatever part these may have had in producing it, or however in one view they may suffice to explain it. Abraham knows that an additional explanation is to be given; that the event, by whatever instrumentality brought about, is to be regarded mainly as holding a place in the moral government of God,

and as ordained by him for the special purpose of carrying forward his righteous and holy administration over his intelligent creatures. In this light it is to be represented by Abraham to his children and his household ; and as the friend of God, he is to turn it to account for causing them to keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and truth.

“ I will sing of judgment as well as mercy,” says the Psalmist. And if any one be indeed the friend of God, he will enter with holy sympathy into the Lord’s hatred of sin, and not shrink from steadily contemplating and solemnly declaring his judgments to be executed on the workers of iniquity. For to be the friend of God is to stand by him against all his enemies—to resent with a holy indignation all insults and injuries offered to him, and to approve of his purposes of wrath as well as of his plans and promises of love. Other men may abuse or misinterpret the Lord’s forbearance ; putting a false construction on it, as if it implied either connivance at the guilt of sin, or want of resolution to punish it. But you who, as the children of Abraham are, like him, the friends of God, are admitted into his councils. You understand the principle of his providential rule—the reason of that long patience which he has with the workers of iniquity ; and you know that vengeance postponed but not averted must be all the more terrible in the end. Having yourselves scarcely escaped from the wrath to come, by fleeing for refuge to the hope set before you in the gospel, you look forward with trembling awe to the desolation to be wrought on the earth. For the Lord does not hide from you that thing which he does. You see him coming down to inquire into the great wickedness of which the loud cry has entered into his ears. He shows you his arm bared and uplifted to smite terribly the earth. And he does so, that you may command your children and your household after you ; that “ knowing the terror of the Lord you may persuade men.”

IV. THE LIBERTY OF FRIENDLY REMONSTRANCE.

Then said the Lord unto me, Pray not for this people for their good.—

JER. XIV. 11.

(VERSES 23-33).

This pleading with God is the last and highest privilege of that divine friendship which is exemplified in the case of Abraham. He manifests, in the whole of it, the most profound deference and humility, as if deprecating the divine displeasure; "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak;" "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak, yet but this once" (ver. 30-32); and as if he were himself astonished at the liberty he has been emboldened to take, "Behold, now I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (ver. 27-31). But he uses, at the same time, extraordinary freedom of speech, and an importunity that will scarcely take a denial. Nor is it for himself and for his own house that he pleads with the Lord. That would be much. But it is for a city, the cry of whose wickedness has brought the Lord down from heaven to search it out, and to visit it; which is more, greatly more, to be wondered at. That, on the strength of the friendship to which he was so specially admitted, the patriarch should have all boldness in asking favours on his own behalf and on behalf of all that were his,—might not be so very surprising. But that he should venture to come between the great and terrible God and the doomed objects of his righteous indignation; that with no personal interest at stake—nothing that could give him, as it were, a title to interfere—he should dare to arrest the uplifted arm of vengeance, and deprecate the descending blow; as if he affected almost to be more reasonable and more merciful than the very God of love himself;—what intimate, unbounded, most artless and fearless confidence of friendship does this

imply! Surely it is the perfection of that love which casteth out fear!

Let it be observed, however, first, that there is no intrusive forwardness in this intercessory pleading; no attempt to pry into the secret things which belong to the Lord our God (Deut. xxix. 29); no thought of meddling with the purposes or decrees of election, which the Lord reserves exclusively to himself. The patriarch does not aspire to any acquaintance with these high and hidden mysteries; nor does he consider that to be necessary in order to his offering such sort of prayer. Why, indeed, should it be thought necessary? Why should any of you ever feel yourselves hindered or restrained in praying for the unconverted,—for the unconverted world,—for unconverted cities,—for unconverted individuals,—because you are ignorant of God's purpose of election respecting them? Does that ignorance prevent you from labouring for their good? Not unless your mind is wholly perverted by unprofitable speculation. You have no embarrassment about addressing yourself to the task of doing all you can for the conversion of one, respecting whom you are sure there is a predeterminate purpose of God, while yet you know not, and cannot know, what that purpose is. You set yourself to the work, because what you do know of the nature of the danger and the method of deliverance is sufficient to warrant reasonable hope, and to make exertion on his behalf, and the use of means, an anxious labour indeed, but far from desperate. And what more is needed in order to your praying for him? You cannot but desire his salvation, and assuredly, so long as he is spared, you are not forbidden to desire it. And what is that very desire itself but prayer? Your "heart's desire," and therefore "your prayer" for him, is that he may be saved (Rom. x. 1). Certainly Abraham stood on no other ground than you may occupy, when he pleaded with God for the cities of the plain. He was as ignorant as you are of the Lord's eternal decrees. But he laid hold of the things revealed, as belonging to men

and to their children ; and therefore he longed, and, longing, he prayed that to each and all of the sojourners in the plain the long-suffering of God might yet in the end prove to be salvation (2 Pet. iii. 15).

Nor, secondly, does Abraham in this pleading arrogate any thing to himself. It is not an intercession on the ground of any merit of his own, or any title he may have to obtain favours for others. He does not ask the Lord, as for his sake, to spare or bless those for whom he prays. There is one intercessor alone to whom this is competent, the one only mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ the righteous. It is in a very different character, and in a very subordinate capacity, that Abraham ventures to plead for his fellow-sinners. "His goodness extendeth not to the Lord ;" "he is but dust and ashes." Nay, so far as he is himself personally concerned, he is lost and condemned. It is by grace alone, and through a righteousness not his own, that he has any footing at all in the favour and friendship of God. But the footing which he thus has is a very sure as well as a very exalted footing. He has "boldness and access, with confidence ;" he has liberty to converse with God familiarly as a friend ; and not for himself only, but for others, and indeed for all, to invoke the name of him whose "memorial to all generations" is this ;—"The Lord, the Lord God merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth ; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty" (Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7).

For, in the third place, Abraham's expostulation proceeds upon this name of the Lord ;—or in other words, upon the known character of God, and the known principles of his administration. Aspiring to no acquaintance with the secret decrees of God ;—and standing upon no claim of merit in himself ;—he has warrant enough for the earnestness of his intercessory pleading, in the broad general aspect of the nature and moral government of God, to which he

pointedly refers. He knows God as the just God and the Saviour ; and on that twofold knowledge of God he builds his argument.

1. "Is God unrighteous in taking vengeance?" Far be that thought from the devout and humble heart of believing Abraham. He does not cherish the vain and presumptuous notion on the strength of which not a few are inclined to build their hope of an undefined measure of indulgence being extended to the ungodly. They would oppose the infliction of judgment altogether, as implying extreme severity and unreasonable harshness. Even Sodom, they think, may and ought to be spared ; not for much good to be found in it, but because, after all, its wickedness is not so aggravated and inexcusable as to deserve so terrible a visitation. Much, or at least something, may be said in palliation of the corruption of its inhabitants ; and at the worst they have some redeeming features. A merciful God may be expected to make some allowances, and so far relent as to let them alone. In all such pleadings there is a lurking disbelief of the righteousness of God—an impeachment of the rectitude of his judgments—an entire want of sympathy with that holiness which sin offends, and that sovereign authority which sin sets at defiance. Are such pleaders and plausible reasoners as these, such smooth apologists of evil, with their feeble condemnation of God's enemies, and their sensitive recoil from the idea of God's wrath coming down upon them ;—are they indeed his friends ? Are they on the Lord's side ? Not such is the spirit of Abraham. He acquiesces in the destruction of the wicked ; he acknowledges the righteousness of the Judge of all the earth ; he is aware that judgment is inevitable. Nor does the thought offend him. It is not from any complacency towards the wicked, or any indifference to the just claims of God, that he would have Sodom spared. Let the wicked perish, rather than the divine justice be impeached. "Let God be true, but every man a liar ; as it is

written, that thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged" (Rom. iii. 4).

2. What, then, precisely is his plea? On what is it that he rests his hope in these plaintive intercessory petitions?—"Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee" (ver. 23-25). What is it that he is so anxious about in this earnest pleading? Is it merely the temporal destruction of the righteous who may be in Sodom that Abraham deprecates so pathetically—their being involved in the judgment of fire which was to overtake the devoted city? Doubtless that is an evil against which, on behalf of his godly neighbours, the friend of God does well to pray. The desolating march of God's ministers of wrath here below,—the devouring fire and the raging storm,—war, pestilence, and famine,—cannot but affect most grievously the faithful people of God, who may be dwelling among the objects of his just indignation. And on that ground alone may one interceding for them desire and ask the suspension or removal of such wide-sweeping calamities impending over the cities of their habitation. But the righteous, after all, whatever may come upon the wicked; and however they may suffer along with them for a season, are safe in the end. It is not for their sakes chiefly that delay of the threatened doom, and a lengthened season of gracious forbearance, are to be sought. At any rate, Abraham's petition goes far beyond the mere exemption of the righteous from temporary suffering and trial. That might have been accomplished in another way than the one which he points out;—as ultimately it was accomplished by the deliverance of Lot. Such a manner, however, of saving the righteous from the evil to come, does not occur to Abraham; not even when, in the progress of his singular

expostulation, he assumes, at every stage, a more desperate case ;—not even then, does it enter into his mind as a last resource—a final alternative. He does not so much as put it forward as a forlorn hope. To the last, he is bent upon the intercepting of the judgment altogether—the sparing of the guilty thousands, in consideration of the ten righteous men who may be found among them.

For he has got hold of that grand principle of the moral administration of God, as applicable to this fallen, but not irrecoverably fallen, world, that the righteous “are the salt of the earth.” He has learned the lesson which the parable of the tares was intended to teach. So long as God may have a single stalk of wheat in the field, which might be lost and confounded among the tares in their premature destruction—so long as he may have a single little one not yet gathered to himself from among the crowd of the ungodly—so long as the mass is not so hopelessly corrupt and putrid, but that the savour of one holy man’s zeal and love may yet keep some small portion of it from decay—so long God will spare the most abandoned city, and will not sweep the earth with his besom of destruction. On this assurance Abraham plants his foot. From this high ground he makes his assault, as it were, knocking at the door of Heaven’s mercy, and importunately besieging the throne of Him who “would have all men every where to be saved.” Spare Sodom for fifty. Spare it for forty-five. Spare it for thirty. Spare it for twenty. Spare it even for ten. Why should even ten of thy children be partakers, though but as it were in passing, in so terrible a desolation ? And why should even Sodom, with all the greatness of its cry, and all the unutterable enormities of its miserable inhabitants, be given over as desperate while ten righteous men are in it ? Are there still ten who “sigh and who cry for all the abominations that are done in the midst of the city ?” Are there “a few names, even in Sardis, who have not defiled their garments ?” Let honour be put on these ;—a remnant,

a mere handful though they be. Let the salt, if it have not wholly lost its savour, still for a time season the mass. Let the light still shine. It may be, that even Sodom, through the continued shining of the light, be it ever so faint and flickering, may yet ere long turn to the Lord.

Such is the principle of Abraham's intercession for Sodom. And as it is founded on a right understanding of the nature and design of God's moral government of the world, so in the fourth place, it is combined with a spirit of entire submission to the divine sovereignty. Abraham's petition is persevering and importunate ; but all throughout he is most anxious to disclaim every thought of interfering with the supreme will of God ; every idea of casting an imputation on his perfect equity and justice, or challenging his right to do whatever may seem to him good. The growing earnestness and intensity, we might almost say impatience, of his pleading, is tempered by a profound sense of the liberty he is taking, and a salutary fear of offending. In the very presence-chamber of God himself, speaking to him as a man speaks to his friend, he does not forget his own position ; he is but dust and ashes ; while God is the Judge of all the earth. He is sure that God will deal righteously and do right. He puts away, as repugnant to God's character, as well as to his own feelings, the very idea of the righteous and the wicked being placed on an equality : "Be it far from thee, Lord." He knows that that is, and must be, far from the Lord. Whatever may be the issue, he is sure that this will be made manifest, not perhaps in the very way he would suggest, but in the way most glorifying to God, and ultimately most satisfying to all who are his friends. Hence, in the end, he is contented with an answer, which, after all, seems to leave the matter still in doubt. In the holy boldness of his pleading—his bargaining, we might almost call it, with the Lord—he has brought him down to the very lowest point ;—"I will not destroy it for ten's sake" (ver. 32). And there he is satisfied to rest. He receives no explicit

reply,—nothing beyond a general explanation and assurance ; he asks no more ; he commits all to God. If it be possible, he now clearly sees, the judgment will pass from Sodom. But the Lord's will be done. The case may be so aggravated and so hopeless, as to preclude the possibility of longer forbearance ; —as was the case of the city, respecting which the Lord said by the mouth of Ezekiel (xiv. 14), “ Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness ;” or the people to whom he spoke by the mouth of Jeremiah (xv. 1), “ Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people ; cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth.” Still the friend of God has discharged his own conscience and unburthened his soul. And with God, whom he has been addressing so confidently as a friend, he confidently leaves his cause.

And now, the Lord having communed with Abraham as his friend, and “ gone his way,” Abraham “ returns unto his place” (ver. 33). With so many tokens of the divine friendship, he may well return in peace. He may well use the language of gratitude, “ Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee” (Ps. cxvi. 7). Yes. For he has been enabled virtually, in faith, to use the language of submission—“ Father, if it be possible, let the cup pass. Nevertheless, Father, not my will but thine be done.”

Altogether this divine friendship has in it passages of most wonderful grace. 1. The Lord has condescended to visit Abraham on terms of very intimate familiarity,—accepting a common office of kindness, and sharing his simple and homely noonday meal. 2. He has blessed, by his presence, Abraham's heart and home ; searching out, indeed, hidden unbelief, as well as timid, faithless guile ;—but yet speaking a word in season ;—speaking comfortably, speaking peace. 3. He has not hid from Abraham the thing he is doing.

He has made him acquainted with his judgments, that in the day of calamity his own soul may not be overwhelmed,—and that, knowing the terror of the Lord, he may persuade men. And (4.) he has permitted the patriarch to unburthen his soul, by pouring out his desires on behalf of the godly remnant in the midst of an ungodly city, as well as on behalf of the ungodly city itself.

Are not these the very privileges of that friendship in which we may rest and rejoice,—friendship with the same Lord who thus treated Abraham as his friend? Let us hear his own word:—"Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you." We are his friends, on the very same ground on which Abraham was called his friend, and to the very same effect. "Henceforth, I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (John xv. 15).

XXIII.

THE GODLY SAVED, YET SO AS BY FIRE; THE
WICKED UTTERLY DESTROYED.

GEN. XIX.

If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?—1 PETER iv. 18.

THE catastrophe recorded in this chapter is typical of the final judgment of the world; while at the same time it illustrates the principles of the divine administration, as connected with that solemn procedure. In both views, the narrative is referred to and commented upon, not only by our Lord in his discourse upon the downfall of Jerusalem, but by the apostle Peter also, in his warning to the church respecting the last times. In that warning he emphatically quotes as a precedent this very visitation; briefly summing up the lesson which it teaches;—"The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (2 Pet. ii. 6-9).

The expression, "the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations" is very emphatical and comprehensive. He can, and he will deliver them; he is sure to deliver them; and his deliverance of them will be in a way of his own,—by mingled mercies and judgments, "by terrible things in righteousness." But while he is delivering them, he keeps the wicked in reserve for final condemnation.

So the Lord "delivered just Lot." "He knew how to

deliver him ;” the deliverance was of the Lord alone, and it was in a way of his own. This may be seen in several particulars connected with the preliminaries, the substance, and the sequel, of the great work achieved.

I. Among the preliminaries of the deliverance I notice first, what is implied in the very name given to Lot by the apostle. That, in the midst of all the ungodliness and iniquity of Sodom, Lot might still be characterised as “godly” and “just,”—is itself a remarkable proof that “the Lord knoweth how to deliver.”

When Lot chose to dwell among the cities of the plain, he seems to have acted under the influence of worldly motives, and in the full knowledge that the people with whom he must associate “were wicked before the Lord, and sinners exceedingly.” The well-watered valley of the Jordan, and the flourishing cities which already crowned its banks, attracted his longing eye. He would multiply his flocks amid the fertile fields round Sodom ; and in Sodom itself his character and wealth might procure for him a name. Thus he ventured to come into contact with the world. That he suffered from the contact, in respect of his personal religion, is but too probable, or rather certain, as this very narrative proves. That he did not suffer more, was of the Lord’s undeserved mercy. He has now been many years in Sodom ; and he is still the godly, the just Lot.

How has he escaped the contamination ? What is the sure sign that he has escaped it, as well as the explanation of his escape ? What is the testimony of the Holy Ghost ? He was “vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked : for that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds” (2 Pet. ii. 7, 8). That was his security ; he retained his spiritual discernment, his spiritual taste. He loved not them that hated the Lord ; he had no sympathy

with their ungodliness. He did not learn to palliate or excuse, either their unholy opinions or their unlawful deeds,—to call them by smooth names, affect a soft and serene charity, and hope the best even of the world lying in wickedness. He was vexed,—he vexed himself. The English word here is too weak by far. He was wearied, worn out, worn down, by the impieties with which the lawless were conversant. They were an intolerable burden to him. Thus the Lord knew how to deliver him, by keeping alive in his soul, amid abounding iniquity, an undiminished zeal for truth and righteousness, and an uncompromising hatred of all evil.

II. Secondly, That on the eve of this dread catastrophe, Lot is found in the way of duty, is a farther proof and illustration of the fact, that “the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations.”

When the two angels came to Sodom at even, Lot was sitting in the gate of the city (ver. 1). As Abraham, at noon-day, ere he sat down to his meal,—so Lot, at night, ere he retired to rest, remained on the look-out for those who might need his hospitality. Especially, if any of the remnant of God’s people, persecuted and homeless, should be passing through the accursed city, it was indeed a most essential service to intercept them at the gate, to prevent them from falling into the hands of the crowd, whose companions or whose victims it was alike fatal to become, and to give them the shelter of a roof beneath which the Lord was worshipped. Thus Lot was employed, when all the rest of the city were probably either sunk in slumber, or abandoned to riot. Had he been asleep, like the others, or had he been indulging in vain and sinful dissipation, he might have missed the visit of the friendly angels; they might have passed by his house. For even when he actually accosted them with the frank offer of entertainment, they made as though they would have declined it (ver. 2, 3). They needed to be pressed. It was only to Lot’s importunity that they yielded. For he was not

merely willing to do good as he had opportunity ; he did not wait for the opportunity ; he sought it and was on the watch for it. And when it did occur, he would take no denial. Not in his own dwelling, but in the gate of the city he was on the watch ; not on those who sought, but on those even who were most reluctant to receive it, would he force his kindness. He would suffer none to fall unawares into the snares of the wicked, but would compel all to come in, and share the homely fare of his table, and the holy worship of his family altar.

Nor was this an easy exercise of godly charity, or one implying little personal risk. He made his house a mark for the assaults of "the men of the city," who could scarce endure that so godly a man should dwell among them,—far less that he should reprove or restrain their sins. That fearful night tried both them and Lot. "The wicked plot against the just." Doubtless they have an old grudge to gratify. And now they seize the opportunity of at once indulging their passions, and wreaking their vengeance on one whose faithful testimony and consistent life they have found to be an intolerable offence and provocation (ver. 4-6). The man of God, meanwhile, all unconscious of the gathering storm, is enjoying the rich reward of his seasonable hospitality. He has made a feast for his unknown guests. To his surprise and delight, he discovers their holy character, perhaps also their heavenly rank. An hour is spent in quiet and blessed fellowship ; the evening service of devotion is over ; the family of the godly are preparing to lie down in peace. But there is no peace to the wicked ; they are as the troubled sea that cannot rest. Thus the wild tumult rages all around, while the house of the man of God is as a little ark of safety. Once, indeed, even that sanctuary is almost violated. "Just Lot" is pressed, and wellnigh overpowered. He is shut up in a terrible perplexity. He would make a sad, a dreadful compromise (ver. 7, 8).

Are the ungodly then to triumph ? Is Lot to sacrifice all

for the sake of these servants of God? And to sacrifice all in vain? (ver. 9).

Suddenly Lot is rescued, and the people are smitten. They grope in the darkness, and weary themselves for nought, while the household of the man of God may retire safely to repose. So "the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations;" so he confounds the designs of their enemies; so "he giveth his beloved sleep" (ver. 10, 11).

III. In the third place, that Lot is willing, at this crisis, to be still a preacher of righteousness, is a further token of the Lord's hand in his deliverance. The faith which could move him to go forth on the errand on which the angels sent him, was manifestly the gift of God (ver. 12-14). Lot at once believes what the angels tell him; and he is not afraid to avow his belief. He has often before warned the ungodly to flee from the wrath to come; but "who has believed his report?" "All day long he has stretched forth his hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people." And as their conversation has vexed him, so his interference has only served to irritate them. Even his own relatives and acquaintances,—the very men who are, or are to be, his sons-in-law,—to whom his daughters are married or betrothed,—are led astray with the error of the wicked. Where are they during this memorable night, when Lot is entertaining his holy guests, and the people have arisen in their fury against him? Have they turned their backs on the dwelling of the righteous? Are they keeping company with sinners;—if not encouraging, at least not disowning their iniquity? Well might Lot hesitate in these circumstances, however warm his natural affection, and however strong his sense of duty. Well might he be tempted to conclude, that having enough to do at home, he need not venture on a fruitless experiment abroad. It is incurring deadly risk in vain. For how can he expect to be believed, when he has so incredible a tale to tell?

As yet the night is calm;—no sign is there of the fiery

storm. The unbroken earth is reposing under the serene and starlit sky.

What does this dreamer mean with his dismal cry of woe? Our fathers lived and died in these cities, and all things continue as they were in their days.

So might the scoffers say; forgetting already, in their wilful ignorance, the watery foundation, and the watery fate, of that old world, which the flood swept away; and not considering what magazines of explosive fuel their sulphureous soil even now concealed, ready, on the touch of a single bolt of heavenly fire, to burst forth and devour them. So will the scoffers of all ages say, losing sight alike of the recorded instances of God's past judgments in history, and of the appalling signs and symptoms with which even the present economy of the world abounds, ominous of more terrible judgments yet to come. For in the elements of nature the Lord has instruments and materials of his vengeance, whether through flood or flame, always prepared; "fire and hail, snow and vapours, stormy wind fulfilling his word" (Ps. cxlviii. 8). And in the bowels of this globe, as in a deep and vast storehouse, there is matter in abundance, with volcanic agency enough, to involve the whole, at any moment, in one burning ruin.

But, as it will be in the end of the world, so was it in that catastrophe by which the end of the world was foreshadowed. The crowded thousands in these cities, all unconscious of the charged mine on which they stood, laughed to scorn the voice of warning. But the godly man who uttered it lost not his reward. "Their blood was on their own heads; they died in their iniquities." But "he delivered his own soul."

IV. Coming now from the preliminaries of the deliverance to the actual deliverance itself, I remark,—in the fourth place, that the haste, the friendly violence, the stern command with which Lot was hurried out of the city, and on to the moun-

tain, are unequivocal marks of this deliverance being the Lord's (ver. 15-17). For there is scarcely any surer or more characteristic sign of the Lord's manner of delivering the godly out of temptation than this. He uses a constraining force, and teaches them to use it. The kingdom of heaven is taken by violence.

For, first, he rouses them betimes, and hastens them to depart, on pain of instant destruction (ver. 15). Again, when they loiter and linger, loath to leave all the world behind, he constrains, and, as it were, compels them (ver. 16). Nor will he suffer them so much as to look back or to pause; onwards, still onwards, for your lives, is his word (ver. 17). Thus decisive and peremptory is the Lord's dealing with those whom he would save. But it is not more peremptory than the case requires.

1. To snatch a brand from the burning—to apprehend a soul just about to be consumed with the wicked—to get Lot out of Sodom—to bring you, brother, out of Babylon—demands not a soft and gentle touch, but a prompt, powerful, and commanding grasp. “When the morning arose, the angels hastened Lot” (ver. 15).

Are you in danger of perishing in the midst of those on whom the wrath of God lies? Are you entangled in the world's friendship, and is the world swiftly to be judged? Is the morning almost already risen—the morning of the judgment day? And are you still to be delivered? Is “the harvest past,—the summer ended,—and you not saved?” What time is this for delicacy and dalliance—that your couch should be very cautiously approached, and your rest very softly and smoothly broken, lest some pleasing dream should be too rudely interrupted, and the shock of an abrupt awakening should ruffle and discompose you! And, when you open your drowsy eyes, and listlessly catch the hasty summons to arise,—will you still complain that it is too soon to be up, murmuring your sluggish wish—“yet a little sleep, a little slumber?”

Bless the Lord, if in such a crisis he has not taken you at your word, and let you alone, as you desired him to do ; if he leaves you not to repose, but cuts short your half-waking and dreamy musing ; if he “ hastens you.” “ Awake ! Arise ! Lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city ! ”

2. But, when all is ready, and you are now at the very point to flee, do you linger still ? Is there a moment's halting—a moment's hesitation ? Are you wavering ? Are you undecided ? It is Satan's golden opportunity. Another instant of doubt or of deliberation, and you are lost.

Bless the Lord again,—who, being merciful to you, seizes you by the hand, and, scarce allowing you time to think, brings you quickly forth, and sets you without the city ! “ While he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand ; the Lord being merciful unto him ; and they brought him forth, and set him without the city ” (ver. 16). Oh, how many of God's people have found and felt,—in the very act of their turning their back on an evil world, and quitting its snares for ever,—a kind of infatuation or spell coming over them ;—like that fatal torpor, which, creeping upon the frozen limbs of the wanderer amid the snows, tempts him to lie down for a seductive rest ! Were there but a companion near, to take him at that critical moment by the hand, the doomed man might be made to move on ; his lethargic apathy would be shaken off. Let but a few paces be briskly traversed, and he would be safe. So God apprehends the fugitives from Sodom, when he sees them lingering. He constrains them to make a movement in advance. Let but one decided effort be made—one irrevocable step taken, under the leading of God's providence, and by the power of his word and Spirit—and the Rubicon is crossed ; the better part is chosen ; the city of iniquity is finally forsaken.

3. Is there, after all this, danger still ? Have the fugitives not escaped ? May they not conclude that all is safe ? Alas, no ! They have escaped indeed, but how narrowly !—

by what a hair's-breadth ! And they must make good their escape ; they must " make their calling and election sure." Moved and led by heavenly power, they have been brought forth, and set without the city. But the command still is, " Escape for thy life ;" and the warning is, " Look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain " (ver. 17).

But may not the exile, now that he is fairly out of the city, relax his speed, and proceed a little more leisurely ? May he not cast his eye once more on the scene he is forsaking, and indulge one last, lingering, farewell look ? At his peril be it if he do. One who should have shared his flight to the last has tried the experiment. She cleaves to her old home ; she loves the world, and in the world's swift judgment she is miserably engulfed. " His wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt " (ver. 26). One look behind is fatal ; to pause is ruin.

Who is there who has been persuaded and enabled to come out from among the ungodly,—escaping the corruption that is in the world through lust ? " Remember Lot's wife." Say not, Let me go and bury my father,—let me return to bid farewell to my friends,—but one more embrace, but one more look ! Tempt not the Lord. He who says, " Follow me," utters also these solemn words :—" No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." " If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him." Be not " of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul." And let the voice of Him who has led you forth ring continually in your ears ;—" Escape still for thy life ;"—" Look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain."

V. In the last place, one other feature of this deliverance, and of the manner of it, is to be noticed, as especially marking it to be of the Lord. Not only is the sovereignty of the Lord manifest in the very peremptory tone of authority, as well as in the constraining hand of power, which, in a manner, force

Lot out of Sodom ;—the grace of the Lord also remarkably appears in the seasonable personal interview vouchsafed to him, and the tender and paternal solicitude evinced for his immediate comfort, not less than for his final safety. For the Lord manifests himself to Lot in another way than he does unto the world,—in a way of peculiar favour,—listening to his remonstrance and conceding his request (ver. 18-21).

That it is the Lord himself who now confers with Lot, may be fairly gathered from the use of the singular pronoun instead of the plural, indicating the presence of one distinct from the “two men,” or angels, who at first ministered to him,—as well as also from the style of Lot’s address, and of this divine person’s reply. Lot speaks to him as to the Supreme God, and in that character also he speaks to Lot ; taking upon himself the divine prerogatives of accepting the person of the godly, hearing his prayer, and determining the time of judgment on the wicked. Thus it would seem that he who had remained behind with Abraham, while his two attendants went on to Sodom, now himself appears again to take part in the awful scene. For his elect’s sake he comes ; and amid the terrors of that dark day he is welcome:

1. Lot stands accepted before him, and boldly pleads his privilege of justification ; “Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou has showed unto me in saving my life” (ver. 19). He is “strong in faith, giving glory to God.” And to what does he look as the ground of his confident assurance ? Simply to that rich mercy which God has magnified on his behalf, and that great salvation which God has wrought for him. The acceptance, the justification, on which he relies, is altogether gratuitous and free. It is of the Lord’s mercy that he is not consumed. By grace he is saved ; by grace “his heart is established.” He has lost his all ; his corn and wine no longer abound ; his fondest earthly hopes are blighted, and his dearest affections torn. Still, amid dreariness and desola-

tion, he can appeal to God and say,—“I have found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy in saving me.” The light of God’s countenance shines upon him; his Redeemer, his Saviour, is with him; and that is enough. He believes; and he has peace in believing. “Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olives shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat: the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab. iii. 17, 18).

2. Nor is this all. His Saviour is one who is touched with a feeling of his infirmities, and will not refuse his prayer. “Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief,” is, after all, the best profession for a feeble soul to make. The faith of Lot, simple and sincere as it was, could not be considered perfect; he had his misgivings and doubts. The distance and danger of the refuge whither he had to flee, filled him with anxiety and alarm;—“I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die” (ver. 19). Might no nearer, no safer, no less dreary shelter be found? It is hard to be all at once cast out upon the solitary wild. Such thoughts vexed the rescued soul of Lot. But in the Lord he found relief. He did not nurse these melancholy musings sullenly and suspiciously in his own bosom. He poured them forth into the ears of the Lord. With humble and holy boldness he ventured to represent his case to a present and sympathising God;—to plead, to reason, to expostulate,—with a touching and pathetic, a child-like earnestness, such as only the spirit of adoption, the spirit that cries *Abba Father*, could inspire;—“Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one: Oh, let me escape thither (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live” (ver. 20). The appeal was not in vain. He who knows our frame was not offended by the liberty which his servant took;—“See, I have accepted thee concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city, for the which thou has spoken” (ver. 21).

The boon, indeed, though granted, would, as the Lord knew well, stand Lot in little stead. The ruin of the cities was to be so much more appalling in reality than imagination could anticipate, that even Zoar would soon be felt to be unsafe, and Lot himself would be glad at last to escape to the mountain (ver. 30). It is possible that, foreseeing this, the Lord granted merely a temporary respite to this little city; which, indeed, was all that Lot's petition required. But at all events, how graciously was that petition heard, even though it might seem needless and unavailing in the end! As a temporary halting-place, at the least, for the harassed pilgrim, it was a seasonable act of kindness to spare the little city,—an act which stands as a signal instance of the Lord's care, not merely for the final salvation of his people, but for their refreshment and consolation by the way,—like the washing of the disciples' feet, as preparatory to the hard pilgrimage on which he is about to send them.

Thus always, in little as well as greater matters, we may see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living. Even at the worst, the world is not all barren. In the most sweeping desolation, levelling the houses and cities of our habitation to the ground,—in the wide waste beneath which all things bright and fair seem buried,—some little Zoar is left, some haven of rest in which the weary spirit may recruit its strength. Such earthly refreshment the redeemed child of God, who has turned his back on Sodom, may lawfully ask,—such green spot in the desert,—such little city of refuge amid the storm;—in the bosom of domestic peace, and the endearments of a quiet home;—that he may not be tried above measure. Only let his request be moderate; “See now it is a little one,—is it not a little one?” Let it also be a request offered in faith, as to a friend and father, with submission to his wisdom and trust in his love. And if the request be granted,—if the object of his fond regard, for which he speaks, be spared to him,—if he get a little Zoar to flee to,—let him not set his heart on it too

much. For a brief space he may rejoice in it ; but let him be ready to quit it soon, as Lot did, and if need be, to dwell in the mountain and in the cave. That may be the Lord's way of thoroughly humbling and proving him, for the very purpose of his salvation being seen to be all of grace.

3. For yet, once more, the Lord has a sad lesson to teach the patriarch,—that it is not merely deliverance from Sodom, whether in Zoar or in the mountain, that he really needs, but deliverance from himself. For, alas ! after all, what security is there either in Zoar or in the mountain,—what shelter from fear,—what safeguard against the assaults of sin ? Even in Zoar fear overtook the patriarch ; and as to the mountain, the shameful incident with which this affecting narrative closes is on record to teach a bitter but a salutary truth.

Let not him who is a fugitive from Sodom ever lay aside his watchfulness, or abandon his attitude of onward and hasty flight. A moment's relaxation of his vigilance,—and Satan has him at an advantage ; all the more in consequence of the excitement of his recent deliverance, and the calm seclusion of his present solitary retreat. Neither his experience of the Lord's salvation, nor his entire separation from worldly temptations, will of itself avail him. Rescued from the world's doom, driven forth from its vain joys, amid such touching mercies and such desolating judgments,—surely his heart will be all the Lord's ! Alas ! that a man's worst enemies should be those of his own household. His own flesh and blood,—the sole surviving pledges of his past love and partners of his present sorrow,—his most cherished earthly treasures—moved, not indeed by horrid passion, but by a carnal policy,—having recourse to devices of their own, instead of leaving all to that God who has already done so much for them—his own daughters betray him into foul sin, and transmit his dishonoured name as a beacon of warning, if not a byword of infamy, to all coming generations.

Strange and startling issue of so wonderful an interposition

on the part of God ! And yet it is the very issue fitted to crown the whole deliverance, and prove it to have been the Lord's. "By terrible things in righteousness" God answers the prayers of his people. And especially when the risk they run is of their own seeking,—as it was in the case of Lot,—the escape is literally like the plucking of a brand out of the burning, or the rescue of a sinking disciple out of the waves of the stormy deep. Is the brand plucked out of the burning to have no singe upon it ? Is the disciple rescued from the waves to have no damp cleaving to his garments ? Can Lot come out of Sodom,—even by a Divine interposition,—untainted by its lusts ?

The whole history of Lot is a precious lesson to the humble believer, whatever ground of triumph it may give to the proud scoffer. And it is a lesson to the one, in the very particulars in which it is a cause of boasting to the other. That a godly man should have volunteered to be a resident in Sodom—and upon such manifestly worldly considerations—is enough to win a smile from the profane, while it costs the pious a tear. That in his very escape out of Sodom's doom, he should show the taint of Sodom's foul fellowship—may turn the sneering smile into a broad laugh on the one hand. But, on the other hand, will it not deepen the pious tear into a gush of inward conviction—prompting the eager cry—"Cleanse me, O Lord, from secret faults !" "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?" "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me."

THE SEQUEL OF THE DELIVERANCE.

The end of this whole transaction is the destruction of the ungodly. During the process of delivering just Lot, they are "reserved ;" the sentence impending over them is suspended. But it is suspended only that the godly may be delivered—

and it is suspended only until they are delivered. Hear the amazing words—"I cannot do any thing till thou be come thither" (ver. 22)—marvellous words of grace to the godly! But how terrible as words of wrath to the wicked! For, mark the terrible announcement—"The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar" (ver. 23). It is the signal for the punishment to begin. Up to this point the doomed people have dwelt securely, reckoning on all things continuing as they are. The voice of the preacher, indeed—perhaps also that of the magistrate (if Lot ever held such an office)—has been testifying to the last against them; and, on the very eve before their doom, the hand of God himself, smiting them in the act of sin, may well warn them to beware. But to-morrow, they say, shall be as this day, and much more abundantly. Day after day has the sun shone upon them in his splendour, and the shades of evening have gathered peacefully over them. What idle rumour is this, as if the sun were not to rise on the morrow?

The sun, indeed, rose on the morrow. But he was just "risen on the earth when Lot entered into Zoar."

Then comes the end; the judgment for which the wicked have been reserved; inevitable and inexorable. For this is the manner of God. Long time his hand seems to tremble, as if he were reluctant to strike. But he is waiting for the day—the fixed and appointed day. So soon as that day's sun is risen on the earth, the stroke descends. And, when it does descend, it is with terrible decision. There is no relenting then; no apparent hesitation; no more tender reasoning with himself—"How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel?" The Lord waits long to be gracious, as if he knew not how to smite. He smites at last as if he knew not how to pity.

For he is the Lord;—he changes not. He changes not, either in his purpose of saving love, or in his purpose of righteous retribution. Not in mere weak and fond compassion

does he spare the guilty—but on a set plan of righteousness—for a set end—during a set time. And not in sudden anger,—but in the terrible calmness of deliberate judgment,—he awards the punishment to which they are reserved. Up to the very moment when the day of grace is expired, all things continue as they were ; it would seem as if neither earth nor heaven were ever to be shaken. “ But the sun is risen on the earth, when Lot enters into Zoar ;” and then comes the end.

Into the details of the catastrophe, it is not my purpose to enter. It may have been brought about in a great measure by the agency of natural causes—by the electric flash, perhaps, and sulphureous and volcanic explosions. The miracle of wrath lay in the foresight and adaptation of all the physical as well as the moral circumstances of the scene, for the accomplishment of the will of God.

It is a scene to be repeated, on a vastly enlarged scale, at the end of the world. For, “ as it was in the days of Lot, they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded ; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all ; even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed ” (Luke xvii. 28-30). And what will all their vain expedients for dissipating thought and pacifying conscience avail the unjust then ? They have “ lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton ; they have nourished their hearts as in the day of slaughter.” They have been reserved unto that day ; shut up, so that none can escape.

Viewed thus, what a spectacle does the ungodly world present ! A pen in which sheep are making themselves fat for the slaughter—a place of confinement—a condemned cell—in which sentenced prisoners are shut up—sinners held fast in the hands of an angry God !

In that final catastrophe also, as in this type of it, a refuge

is provided for the godly. The Lord himself comes, and the dead in Christ rise, and the living are changed. Together they are "caught up to meet him in the air." And then, but not before, "the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat ; the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up."

But not as with the cities of the plain is it to be with the world then. The desolation is not perpetual. No Dead Sea, no unwholesome lake, remains as a monument of the terrible doom. "Behold new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness,"—wherein the righteous dwell for ever with their righteous King. "Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes ; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain : for the former things are passed away."

XXIV.

THE IMPRESSION OF THE SCENE WHEN ALL IS OVER.

GENESIS XIX. 27-29.

Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night ; nor for the arrow that flieth by day ; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness ; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand ; but it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.—PSALM xci. 5-8.

THE deliverance of Lot, amid the ruins of Sodom, is specially connected with the favour God had for Abraham ; “ And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt ” (ver. 29).

The patriarch, let it be remembered, was at this time living within a few hours' distance of the devoted cities ;—probably within sight of them. Of the three divine guests who rested with him at noon, two were at the gate of Sodom before evening—having gone thither, as we are led to believe, in the guise and at the common pace of ordinary travellers. The third, who remained behind, and who turned out to be the Lord himself, conversed with Abraham, on a spot at a little distance from his tent, overlooking the plain which was so soon to be laid waste. To this spot, where he had “ stood before the Lord,” Abraham betakes himself early in the morning. And what a sight meets his eye ? “ He looked toward

Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace" (ver. 27, 28).

What desolation has the Lord wrought on the earth! The fertile and smiling fields are as one vast furnace; a noxious sulphureous vapour clouds all the sky. Of the cities which but yesternight were thronged with countless thousands of thoughtless sinners, not a trace remains. So sure, so sudden, so terrible, is this judgment of the Lord. Has Abraham been indulging some vague and uncertain hope—as if the threatened doom might yet be averted—as if, when the hour came, the Lord might relent? One glance in the early morning puts to flight the imagination.

It is hard, even for God's faithful people, to realise the certainty and the terror of his coming wrath on the children of disobedience; it demands a certain unquestioning and uncompromising loyalty, to which it is difficult indeed to attain. To sympathise with God in his purpose of judgment;—to recognise the righteousness of the doom he inflicts, with feelings free from all alloy of vindictive satisfaction or personal revenge;—is no easy exercise of faith. Even they who, on their own account, have no longer any interest in deceiving themselves on this point, are too prone to do so on account of others. For it is a coarse and senseless imputation which is sometimes cast on the people of God, when it is alleged that the comfortable sense of their being themselves safe may make them look with great complacency or indifference on the doom of their neighbours who are lost. The real tendency of their hearts—the actual temptation to which they are liable—is precisely the reverse. In their own experience,—taught by a quickened conscience—and the Spirit convincing them of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment,—in their own apprehension, they know the terror of the Lord so well,—so vividly do they realise his terrible indignation against all iniquity,—that they almost shrink from the

thought of any one of their fellow-creatures enduring even the convictions to which they have themselves been subjected. Much more do they recoil from the idea of his suffering what these convictions foreshadow and foretell—the gnawing of the worm that never dies, and the burning of the fire that never can be quenched.

Little do the scoffers know of the deep movements of a believer's soul, when they would represent him as exulting over the world that knows not God, or feeling anything in the least like a zest or relish in the anticipation of its fate. In point of fact, he is in nothing more apt to yield to his evil heart of unbelief than in the cherishing of a kind of latent incredulity respecting the punishment of the ungodly. He can scarcely think so very badly of them,—adorned as they may be with many amiable and friendly qualities,—as to be quite satisfied that they must inevitably perish. He would fain persuade himself that judgment will not be so inexorable and severe. He cannot bring himself to conceive of their being all—in one common ruin—swept remorselessly away. Thus even the friend of God, in the tenderness of his heart, may be tempted to feel; and this lurking feeling tends sadly to lower the tone of his own piety, as well as to enfeeble the voice of his testimony against the world's sin, and his pleading for the salvation of the sinner's soul.*

It is good for him, therefore, to gaze on the desolation of that smoking plain. How many fond surmises—how many indistinct and half-unconscious presumptions respecting God's indiscriminate clemency—how many relenting emotions of false pity and false hope—what deceitful pleadings for ungodliness—what inclinations towards the palliating or justifying of evil—what notions of sin's possible impunity and the relaxing of judgment at the last hour—notions most dangerous alike to the cultivation of personal holiness

* See *Exposition of the First Epistle of John*, Lecture xiii.

and the discharge of the public duty of rebuke and persuasion,—does that one glance dissipate and dispel for ever!

Does Abraham retire to rest at night, tempted, in spite of all that he has heard of Sodom's intolerable wickedness and the Lord's stern purpose of wrath, still to entertain the fancy that the case of these sinners may not be, after all, so very bad, and judgment may not be so very terrible and so very near? Does he go out in the morning to the spot where, on the previous day, the Lord had communed with him on this very subject, almost expecting to see the green valleys smiling and the lofty turrets shining, as of old, in the sun's rising splendour? A single look is enough. Too surely does he see that the Lord's word is true; that judgment is certain; that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

There is a spectacle in this view more solemn still. It is the cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The judgment which took effect and was executed upon him is the most affecting of all proofs of the severity of God;—the only proof that will silence every misgiving, and awe into submission every lax and rebellious thought of the evil heart of unbelief. If ever the friend of God is conscious of an inclination to yield to the insidious suggestion of a sentimental pietism and spurious charity—to think that, after all, there may be no such wide separation between the godly and the unjust—between the Lord's people and the world from which they have come out—and that possibly, in the end, there may be no necessity for the actual infliction, on all who will not come to Christ that they may be saved, of so terrible a sentence as that of eternal death;—if ever any follower of Jesus detects himself thus falling into the vague reasonings of carnal wisdom, and beginning to confound the essential distinctions alike of the law and the gospel,—to become the apologist of them that hate God, and to question even the

word of the Most High, which dooms the wicked to hell ;—let him go out betimes in the morning. Let him take his stand on an eminence—apart, by himself alone. Let him behold and see,—not a smoking plain, filling the air with unwholesome vapour,—but darkness on the face of the earth, and amid the darkness, One who knows no sin pouring out his soul unto the death for sin—the well-beloved Son of God enduring the wrath of heaven ! Then and there let him learn a humbler, a sounder faith. What must that judgment be from which the blood of Jesus alone could redeem ! What that aggravated doom which must inevitably await those who crucify the Son of God afresh, and put him to open shame ! “If these things were done in the green tree, what must be done in the dry ?” (Luke xxiii. 31).

But in the midst of wrath the Lord remembers mercy. The prayer of his friend and servant Abraham is not forgotten ; it proves not to be unavailing. At first, indeed, it might seem as if the only answer he was to receive was the sight of this universal desolation. But let him look more narrowly, and he may see one little city exempted for a time from the fiery storm. Let him wait a little, and tidings will reach him of his friend's marvellous escape.

For Lot's sake, for the love and friendship he bore him, Abraham had pleaded with the Lord, in earnest, repeated, importunate supplication. He besought the Lord to spare these cities, that the righteous might not be destroyed with the wicked. He could think of no other way in which the righteous could be saved, except by the wicked, among whom they dwelt, and with whom they seemed to be mixed up, being also spared along with them.

But “by terrible things in righteousness” the Lord answers prayer. Abraham's kind interest in Lot is not in vain, though what he asked on his behalf is not literally granted. God did indeed, notwithstanding Abraham's plead-

ing, overthrow the cities of the plain in which Lot dwelt. But "he remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow." And Abraham, thus edified and comforted, learns the blessed lesson that the Lord's ways are all just and true ; for "the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation," while "the unjust are reserved unto the day of judgment to be punished."

XXV.

CARNAL POLICY DEFEATED—EVIL OVERRULED FOR GOOD.

GENESIS XX. ; XXI. 22-33.

A man's heart deviseth his way ; but the Lord directeth his steps.—PROVERBS xvi. 9.

For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous ; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity.—PSALM cxxv. 3.

THE curtain has closed upon the tragical catastrophe of one act in the divine drama ; commencing with the first arrival of Abraham and Lot within the borders of Canaan, and ending with the fatal storm that turned a smiling valley into the Dead Sea. A new act is opened, when the curtain rises again ; and alas ! it opens darkly.

The transition is marked by a removal, on the part of Abraham, from the place where he had hitherto pitched his tents ; he “ journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar ” (Gen. xx. 1). His change of residence was probably connected with the terrible disaster which he had witnessed. It was high time to move from the accursed neighbourhood, and it was good for him to be reminded that he was but a pilgrim in the land. He had now sojourned for many years in the plains of Mamre (xiii. 18 ; xviii. 1), and he had seen much of the Lord's goodness, as well as of the Lord's terror, there. But still greater things await him ere his pilgrimage finally

closes. The last stage of his earthly journey is to be the most signally blessed and the most remarkably tried of all.

Over its commencement indeed there hangs a dark cloud, into which it would be painful, as well as unprofitable, to search too carefully. It is a repetition of the patriarch's previous sin, in connection with his wife (chap. xii.) ; and it is, therefore, all the more inexcusable. To account for his conduct, without at all extenuating it, some probable explanation may be gathered from the narrative.

I. In the progress of religious apostasy and corruption, a frightful dissolution of manners seems to have extensively overrun the nations ; and, in particular, the inhabitants of Palestine, or the land of Canaan. They had at first usurped possession of the land, contrary to the allotted plan of division announced in the days of Peleg (Gen. x. 25 ; Deut. xxxii. 8) ; and this very circumstance, vitiating their original title, may have led them all the more to cast aside the authority of God. At any rate, in Abraham's day, they were making fast progress to that excess of wickedness which was to justify their ultimate extermination. Abraham, therefore, might well expect to find the people, wherever he went,—not, perhaps, so flagrantly wicked as the dwellers in the cities of the plain,—yet at least so regardless as to warrant no confidence in their sense either of religion or of justice. The very fact of his imagining that he could defend his partner and himself in the character of a brother better than in that of a husband, speaks volumes. Under that impression Abraham acted. In this instance of Abimelech, as well as probably also in the previous case of Pharaoh, he was mistaken. He wronged Abimelech in thinking so ill of him ; and the king's warmth is good (ver. 9-10). As it proved, he might have been trusted ; and it would have been better for the patriarch if he had been less suspicious. Abraham might have believed and hoped that there were some in the world who had not lost all sense of rectitude and honour ; the judgment of charity would have been the judgment of

safety. Still it is melancholy to observe that this is to be viewed as an exception. That the expedient to which Abraham had recourse should have been, on any occasion, thought necessary,—still more, that it should have been thought necessary, not once only, but repeatedly,—is a sad proof of the prevalence of that impious and lawless wickedness which, in the end, made the land “spue out” (Lev. xviii. 28) the nations which defiled it, that in terms of God’s original purpose Abraham’s posterity might possess it.

II. In accordance with this general impression as to the nations with whom his wandering life was to bring him into contact, the patriarch had adopted at the outset a general rule, which he explains to Abimelech : “ I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place ; and they will slay me for my wife’s sake ;” therefore, “ when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt show unto me ; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother ” (ver. 11-13). This does not justify his evasive policy ; it rather aggravates it, as showing it to have been systematic and deliberate. But it explains the repetition of the incident, and the reason why a single check did not suffice to prevent it.

On the former occasion, the Lord did not expressly condemn Abraham, or explicitly forbid the offence of which he had been guilty. That he was virtually reproofed, and in a way fitted to humble him to the dust, is plain enough ; but the reproof was indirect and inferential. For God does not rule believers by mere precepts and prohibitions, precisely and literally laid down. He “ guides them with his eye.” They are not “ like the horse or the mule,” who can be turned or restrained only by positive coercion—“ by bit and bridle.” They are expected to watch the very look of the Lord ; the eye with which he guides them ; any indication of his will which conscience, exercised in prayer upon the leadings of his providence, may give. Such is God’s discipline of his people.

It is a discipline which hypocrites and formalists cannot understand ; a hint, therefore, is lost on them. And even on true believers, a hint is apt to be lost. They might often gather from circumstances what the Lord would have them to do ; as Abraham might have learned, from that previous incident, the lesson of straightforward and single-eyed simplicity in serving God. But it was an old preconcerted plan which would have been thus broken through ; and there was no specific injunction given. The patriarch was not alive and alert enough to note and be guided by the Lord's eye. In consequence, he was led to persevere in a practice evidently reprobated by God, and to repeat conduct which the Lord had marked with his displeasure ;—conduct which all the rather should have been abandoned because the displeasure was indicated indirectly in a way so full of grace and kindness. This want of discernment, this failure in the watchful docility and tact which ought to characterise the walk of a justified sinner and reconciled child with a gracious God and father, brought sin a second time upon Abraham himself ; and formed the double precedent which, it is to be feared, occasioned subsequently Isaac's similar offence.

III. The poor evasion which the patriarch tries to plead in excuse of his conduct might be less discreditable, according to the usages of that age, than when tried by the standard of an entirely different state of society and of the social relations. "And yet indeed she is my sister ; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother ; and she became my wife " (ver. 12). Marriage was then lawful within degrees since forbidden ; and the term sister was commonly applied to any female as nearly related by birth as Sarah was to Abraham. So far, he is warranted in what he says. His real fault was his concealment of his marriage ; a point on which he might consider himself at liberty to exercise his discretion. That he did wrong in resorting to this expedient of concealment is certain ; nor does it appear that he means to justify

himself in the explanation which he gives to Abimelech. He may rather be regarded as merely wishing to show what it was that suggested to him the policy he had adopted, and made it possible for him to follow it. But for the relationship which actually subsisted, he could not have thought of this mode of hiding what he did not think it safe to avow.

IV. The root of bitterness, however, in this melancholy instance, was an evil heart of unbelief. His faith failed him exactly where the faith of many a believer fails ;—not in any fundamental article of the Lord's covenant, nor in the main and essential characteristics of his walk with God ;—but in the practical application of the promises of that covenant and the principles of that walk to some one or other of the details or the difficulties of his ordinary worldly condition. He forgets that he is to bring the high principles of his loyalty to heaven to bear upon the minutest incidents of his state on earth. He begins to consult and act for himself, instead of leaving all to God. It is this infirmity of faith which occasions so many inconsistencies in his daily walk—which entangles him so often in unworthy schemes of compromise and evasion—which mars his peace, and makes him, as a double-minded man, unstable in his ways. And it puts him too often at the mercy of those to whom his disingenuous reserve gives an advantage over him. Like Abimelech, they may have cause to reproach him for the want of that manly and open frankness which it had been better for all parties if Abraham in this emergency had shown.

Still it was good for Abimelech, on the whole and in the end, that a servant and prophet of the Lord was brought into his neighbourhood. God made even the infirmity of the patriarch the occasion of a blessing to the king.

I. It procured for Abimelech the advantage of an immediate visit from God himself. That visit was partly in severity, and partly also in kindness. The king, in this matter, though not aware of the actual state of the case, was by no

means free from blame. The judgment, therefore, which the Lord sent on his house (ver. 18) was not undeserved. But it was mainly with a merciful design that God interposed to warn him. He acknowledges Abimelech's plea of ignorance and innocence in regard to the heinous crime which he was in danger of committing ; while he orders him to redress the wrong which he had undoubtedly done (ver. 5-7).

II. This untoward occurrence was in another way overruled for good. It procured for Abimelech the friendship and the intercessory prayer of one of the chosen servants of God. This was to him a signal benefit, and he was evidently taught gratefully to avail himself of it.

When these two distinguished persons—the prince and the patriarch, mutually both sinned against and sinning—met after the incidents of that memorable day and night, there was much in what had passed to knit them closely together ; and in the frank explanation which ensued between them, there is much that is honourable to both. The king, indeed, has some cause of complaint, and he does complain. He asks what offence he had given to Abraham, or what wickedness Abraham had seen in him, to provoke or warrant the course of conduct he had thought fit to adopt towards him ? And he puts forcibly to Abraham the evil of that conduct, as not only insulting to himself personally, but fitted to “bring on him, and on his kingdom, a great sin” (ver. 9, 10). This honest expostulation must have humbled the patriarch ; and both he and his partner must have felt some shame under the well-merited and delicate hint implied in the gift of the veil.* But

* Such a hint seems to be intended in the somewhat obscure language —“And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver : behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other. Thus she was reproved ” (ver. 16). The king intimates, by way of gentle reproof, that he has made a present to her brother, or husband, of a sum of money for the purchase of coverings for the head, for herself and for her attendants, to be worn in token of their

they do not recriminate. On the contrary, Abraham seems to acquiesce in the king's censure, simply venturing to offer an explanation, rather than an apology, for his conduct. And the king must have condemned himself—all the more because the patriarch abstained from retaliating his accusation. He could not but be touched by the thought of the difficult and dangerous pilgrimage to which Abraham was called, and the sad and peculiar hardship of his position, which seemed to render necessary such an expedient as he had adopted. He could not fail to sympathise with the perplexities and embarrassments which led so holy a man to have recourse to such arts. Thus Abimelech might be prepared to make a friend of this prophet of the Lord, whom he had unwittingly proposed to injure in so tender a point. He deals with him on terms of princely liberality; loading him with favours; and he reaps a rich reward.

He obtains an interest in the prophet's prayers. This was the inducement held out to him by God: "Restore the man his wife, for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live" (ver. 7). Accordingly the patriarch "did pray unto God, and God healed Abimelech and his house" (ver. 17). Abraham thus redresses his share of the wrong. Of the two parties who have offended, each, according to his station and office, seeks to requite the other. The prince bestows his royal bounty, the prophet gives his prayers.

The friendship thus begun is at a subsequent period matured: and on that occasion it still more signally turns to Abimelech's account (xxi. 22-34).

This incident is chiefly remarkable as illustrating the progress of Abimelech's faith, and the consummation of his union with Abraham. It occurred after the birth of Isaac; when being under Abraham's protection and authority; whence, it has been thought, we are to trace the custom to which the apostle Paul refers, as sanctioned by the proprieties of nature, and therefore comely in the church of God (1 Cor. xi. 3-15).

Abraham, having dismissed the son of the bondmaid born after the flesh, has now centred all his hope in the son whom he had received by promise. In these circumstances, Abimelech pays him a visit in state, and proposes to make with him a hereditary alliance. In this proposal he has respect to Abraham's near relation to God. He recognises him as a prince; and evidently anticipates his future possession of the land. He assumes that Abraham and his seed after him are to have an inheritance in Canaan, and to exercise power and authority. Nor is it at all impossible that he may have had his eye on the spiritual as well as the temporal promises connected with the seed of Abraham. For if we consider all the circumstances, it is a very enlarged and enlightened faith that the king here manifests. He seeks to participate in Abraham's favour with God, and to lay hold of God's promises in Abraham. He covets the blessing of those who bless Abraham; he would have himself and his children recognised as fellow-heirs of that righteousness and that salvation which belonged to Abraham. Hence probably his acknowledgment, "God is with thee in all that thou doest;" and his proposal, "Now, therefore, swear unto me here by God, that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned" (ver. 22, 23). Nor was the king's request preferred in vain. The patriarch promptly and frankly consents—"Abraham said, I will swear" (ver. 24).

First, however, he tests the sincerity of Abimelech, by appealing to him on a point of ordinary justice about a disputed right of property in what was then and there of great consequence (ver. 25-26). It relates to the possession and use of the well named Beersheba, or the well of the oath (ver. 31). Abraham takes the king, as it were, at his word, and in his character of a prince, which Abimelech ascribed to him, asserts his title to equal and equitable treatment at his hands—a title

which Abimelech evidently acknowledges, by consenting at once to redress the injury complained of.

Then, this little preliminary being happily adjusted, Abraham proceeds to ratify the covenant of friendly alliance by a transaction which seems to partake of the nature of a sacrificial offering (ver. 27-31). For the seven lambs set apart by Abraham, to be "taken of his hand" by Abimelech—that quantity being too small for a mere present, and being the well-understood sacred and sacrificial number—were probably designed to be victims. The patriarch and the king, therefore, by engaging jointly in that solemn rite, confirmed their compact, as not a civil and political treaty merely, but one that was religious and spiritual also. It would even appear that provision was made for their continuing afterwards to join in occasional acts of worship. The grove planted in Beersheba (ver. 33),—whether by Abraham, as our translators have made it, or by Abimelech, as some suppose,—might be designed for common use. And there, from time to time, the two friends might meet, as members of the same communion,—having now a common faith, a common hope, a common love,—to call in common "on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God" (ver. 33).

Thus Abraham blessed Abimelech: not merely giving him, as a prophet, an interest in his prayers, but, as the heir of the land and the father of the promised seed, admitting him into a participation of the privileges and prospects of his faith. It is truly, in all views of it, a signal instance of evil overruled for good; it is a remarkable illustration of the Psalmist's devout utterance, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain" (Ps. lxxvi. 10).

And not merely in its bearing upon the individual interests of the parties principally concerned is the issue of this transaction significant and important. It is to be considered also in a larger and wider point of view. It is an early example of

the fulfilment of the assurance, that in Abraham and in his seed all the families of the earth were to be blessed. It is not for himself alone that Abraham has found favour in the eyes of God, and has become the father of the one seed to whom all the promises are made (Gal. iii. 16) ; but for others also, not of his natural lineage, if only they are willing to receive all covenant blessings on the same footing with himself. For this end he is brought in contact with Abimelech ; for this end the incidents of their intercourse, so painful and yet so blessed, are placed on record ; that the comprehensive character of the dispensation of God towards the patriarch may receive an early illustration, and that the one spirit animating the church from the beginning may be seen to be what is expressed in the glorious missionary psalm :—" God be merciful unto us, and bless us ; and cause his face to shine upon us ; that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations. Let the people praise thee, O God ; let all the people praise thee. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy : for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon earth. Let the people praise thee, O God ; let all the people praise thee. Then shall the earth yield her increase ; and God, even our own God, shall bless us. God shall bless us ; and all the ends of the earth shall fear him " (Ps. lxvii.).

XXVI.

THE SEPARATION OF THE SEED BORN AFTER THE
FLESH FROM THE SEED THAT IS BY PROMISE.

GEN. XXI.

OF the three pictures which this chapter brings before us, especially in the first twenty verses, the last is by far the most interesting and attractive to the eye of natural taste, and the sympathy of the natural heart.

The festivities attendant upon the birth, the circumcision, and the weaning of Isaac, are contemplated with a feeling of decent and respectful acquiescence, such as seems due to the venerable character of the parties chiefly concerned (ver. 1-8). The strife, again, which some time after ensues in the household, irritates and offends the onlooker;—recalling, as it does, to his mind that former most unseemly female brawl (chap. xvi.), whose smothered embers seem to be now breaking out afresh into a still more outrageous heat (ver. 9-14). But the scene of the poor wanderer, with her helpless boy, in the wilderness of Beersheba, is a very gem for the poet and the painter. The little incident of the child's thirst, and the mother's despair, is one of exquisite truth and tenderness; nor can any thing exceed the pathos of these simple words:—"And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot; for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept" (ver. 15, 16). Her simple and

plaintive utterance of despair may well affect us, since it attracts the compassionate interest of the Lord himself. God listens to the cry of Ishmael and the weeping of his mother. And the angel of God comes to the rescue with salutation full of tenderness—"What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not;" with promises for the future large and liberal—"Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation;" and with present relief most seasonable and satisfying—"And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water: and she went and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink" (ver. 18, 19). Thus, the narrative of this transaction would seem to be so constructed as to enlist our sensibilities rather on the side of the rejected, than of the chosen; and to draw out our affections far more towards the wilderness where Hagar and Ishmael wander, than towards the home where the patriarch, and his holy partner, and the child of promise, dwell. But while freely admitting this, we must remember, that in respect of the place they hold in the grand economy of the divine providence and grace, the first two incidents have a prominence and pre-eminence all their own.

Thus, as to the first, if there be an occasion on earth fitted to call forth the songs of heaven, next to the birth of Jesus, and not second to the birth of his forerunner John, it is the birth of Isaac. Upon no event, between the fall and the incarnation, did the salvation of men more conspicuously depend. And yet few verses of the Bible are more commonplace, and less awakening—at least in our modern view of them—than those that describe the entertainment with which the child of promise was welcomed (ver. 3-8). Nevertheless, Sarah's song, "God has made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me," is the brief model, first of Hannah's (1 Sam. ii. 1-19), and then of Mary's (Luke i. 46-56). And the whole ceremonial here briefly indicated has its antitype and accomplishment in the advent of the Messiah.

As it stands in the history, and as it would appear at the time to the contemporary dwellers in the land, the incident that stirred Abraham's household was insignificant enough. It was a wonder, no doubt, fitted to awaken some attention, that the pilgrim pair should, after so long a childless sojourn together, be blessed with unexpected offspring. But it was a wonder that might soon pass into forgetfulness. Little notice, after all, would be attracted by it then beyond the lowly tent of the patriarch; and little heed may be given by superficial readers now to the summary record of it in the Scriptures; so analogous are the methods of the divine procedure, in providence and in revelation. Let us enter, however, by faith into the mind of the faithful patriarch, as it must have glowed with holy gratitude on the three successive holidays of his son's birth, his circumcision, and his being weaned from his mother's breast;—let us feel as Abraham on these occasions must have felt. And let us seek to catch the spirit of the hymn then virtually anticipated in Sarah's exulting note of joy—the hymn of the heavenly hosts rejoicing in the assurance of salvation to a lost world, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke ii. 14).

It is the central incident, however, the expulsion of Ishmael, which chiefly staggers our natural judgment, while it is that very incident of which the most emphatic use is made in other parts of Scripture for the purposes of the spiritual life.

Beyond all question, the thing here done is felt, at first sight, to be harsh; and the manner of doing it perhaps even harsher still: “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac” (ver. 9, 10).

Surely never was slight offence more spitefully avenged! An unmannerly boy vents some ill-timed and ill-judged jest;—and his mother as well as himself must be cast helpless on

the wide world on account of it! It looks like the very wantonness of female jealousy and passion. No wonder that the proposal vexed and shocked the patriarch. No wonder that he needed a divine communication to make him recognise in his irritated partner's unrelenting demand—"Cast out the bondwoman and her son"—the very mind and will of God himself;—"God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (ver. 12, 13).

Now, it is not necessary to acquit Sarah of all personal vindictiveness, or to consider her as acting from the best and highest motives, merely because God commanded Abraham to "hearken unto her voice." It may have been in utter unconsciousness of its being a heaven-directed and heaven-inspired voice, that Sarah, yielding to an impetuous temper, called for the removal of a rival out of the way of her son's succession and title to the inheritance. At the same time, even if it was so, there are certain circumstances which should be taken into account, not for the vindication of Sarah's conduct, but for the better understanding of the divine procedure.

I. Thus, in the first place, let the actual offence of Ishmael, now no longer a child, but a lad of at least some fourteen years of age, be fairly understood and estimated. The apostle Paul represents it in a strong light—"He that was born after the flesh, persecuted him that was born after the Spirit;"—and he points to it as the type and model of the cruel envy with which the "children of promise" are in every age pursued, for he adds, "even so it is now" (Gal. iv. 28, 29).

From the history itself in fact, it is plain enough that Ishmael's "mocking" had a deeper meaning than a mere wild and wanton jest. The "children," the lads or young men, who "mocked" Elisha after the translation of his master in a chariot of fire, "saying unto him, Go up, thou bald-head; go up thou bald-head,"—knew what they were about better than

we are apt to think (2 Kings ii. 23, 24). It was no boyish frolic—no senseless insolence to Elisha personally—no idle mockery of his grey and scanty locks—that was so promptly and terribly punished ; but a profane and ribbald outburst of blasphemy against the stupendous miracle which had just taken place. They mocked, not the prophet, but his God ; when scoffing at Elijah's glorious ascension into heaven, they taunted his venerable follower with impious scorn ;—Thou, too, "thou bald-head, go up," as he did ! The mockery of Ishmael was probably of a similar kind. That it had respect to the birthright is evident, both from Sarah's reasoning, and from the Lord's. She assigns, as the cause of her anxiety to have Ishmael cast out, her apprehension lest he should claim a joint-interest with Isaac in the inheritance. And the Lord sanctions her proposal on this very ground, when he says to Abraham, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called."

It was a quarrel, therefore, about the birthright, that the mockery of Ishmael indicated or occasioned. And if we suppose him, as is all but certain from the whole tenor of the scriptural references to this transaction, to have been instigated and encouraged by his mother,—considering the prize at stake, and the impetuous blood that boils in the dark veins of Africa's daughters.—we can assign no limits to the extremities her desperate maternal ambition might prompt. It may have been little more than an act of self-defence on the part of Sarah, when she seized the first opportunity of overt injury or insult, to put an end to a competition of claims that threatened consequences so disastrous.

II. Again, secondly, it is to be remembered that the competition in question admitted of no compromise ; and that, whatever might be her motives, Sarah did, in point of fact, stand with God in the controversy. She believed God, when in accordance, not more with her own natural feelings than with the known will of God, she determined to resist every attempt to interfere with the prerogative of the child of

promise. Her determination also would be the more decided, and her announcement of it the more peremptory, if she saw any indication of hesitancy in the mind even of the patriarch himself. For Abraham may have been swayed by his affection for his first-born child, as well as Sarah by her fondness for the son of her old age. In point of fact, Abraham felt great reluctance to give up his hope of Ishmael being his heir and successor in the covenant. Before the birth of Isaac, he clung to that hope with great tenacity, and pleaded hard with God on behalf of Ishmael that he might have the birthright blessing (chap. xvii. 18). And even after that event, he seems still to have had a leaning towards Ishmael. He can scarcely persuade himself to hazard all on so precarious a risk as the puny life of an infant who has so strangely come and may as strangely pass away. He would fain keep Ishmael still in reserve, and not altogether lose his hold of that other line of descent. He would be for combining, in some way, their joint claims, and so doubling his security for the fulfilment of the promises.

That this may have been partly Abraham's state of mind is not at all improbable ; nay, it receives countenance from the pains which the Lord takes to remove the last scruple of lingering unbelief ;—to reconcile him to the destiny of Ishmael, and persuade him to acquiesce in the purpose of sovereign election—"In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (ver. 12, 13). If it was so, not only may the knowledge or suspicion of such a leaning in their favour have made Ishmael and Hagar more presumptuous in their insolence ; but some light is thus thrown on the circumstances of very peculiar difficulty in which Sarah was placed, and the very trying part she had to act towards Abraham. She was wont "to obey him, calling him Lord." But now, a regard to her own rights,—and still more a regard to the will of God and the wellbeing of her husband's soul,—constrain her, however affectionately, yet uncompromisingly, to remonstrate with him and to resist.

III. In the third place, it should not be overlooked that the severity of the measure resorted to is apt to be greatly exaggerated if it is looked at in the light of the social usages and arrangements of modern domestic life.

It was no unusual step for the head of a household, in these primitive times, to make an early separation between the heir, who was to be retained at home in the chief settlement of the tribe, and other members of the family, who must be sent to push their way elsewhere.* It would appear, indeed, that the expulsion was in this instance hurried and abrupt, at least at first. The case being urgent, Abraham sends the young man and his mother somewhat hastily away. But it does not follow that they were sent away cruelly or carelessly. Nor are

* Abraham himself adopted this course with reference to his other sons whom he had besides Ishmael. He "gave all that he had unto Isaac ; but unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son (while he yet lived), eastward, unto the east country" (chap. xxv. 5, 6). This statement occurs in the general summary of Abraham's history that ushers in the account of his death. It can scarcely be doubted that the persons referred to as the mothers of his sons, are simply Hagar and Keturah : for with none else is there the least hint of his having lived in marriage. They are both called by the name commonly given to women occupying a subordinate place in a man's household, as if to mark the unquestionable pre-eminence of Sarah, the one gracious spouse of the patriarch, with whom neither any partner while she survives, nor any successor after she is gone, is to be for a moment put upon a level. The sons of both Abraham is represented as treating exactly in the same way ; his conduct towards Ishmael did not differ at all from what his conduct afterwards was towards the children of Keturah. But there is no question as to his just and liberal treatment of them ; "he gave them gifts." He made provision for their settlement, under his own eye, being both comfortable and reputable ; furnishing them with the means of well-doing. The presumption surely is, that he meant to deal upon the same terms with Ishmael when he and his mother were cast out, and that this is intended to be indicated in the brief description subsequently given of his manner of disposing of his children generally.

they sent away to a far country. They are to wait for further orders on the very borders of the place where Abraham himself is dwelling. The wilderness of Beersheba is almost at his very door; and long ere the bread and water they take with them are consumed, it may be expected that Abraham will be in circumstances to communicate with them more fully as to what they are to do.

By some mistake or mischance, however, it would seem that it unfortunately happened otherwise. Were a conjecture here warranted, it might be surmised as not improbable that the proud spirit of the Egyptian, stung by disappointment, may have become reckless and regardless, both of any provision her master may have promised to make for her, and of any directions he may have given as to the course she was to follow. After roaming thus heedlessly and aimlessly for a time, she may have begun to suffer from the reaction of high excitement; losing her way and her presence of mind, and so bringing upon herself an unnecessary aggravation of her trial. It is some confirmation of the view now suggested, that when Hagar's tears and the lad's cries are heard on high, and the angel comes to administer relief, the manner of that relief is so very simple; "God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink" (ver. 19).

IV. Once more, in the fourth place, a presumptive proof, at least, of the patriarch's continued interest in Ishmael is to be found in the account given of his interview with Abimelech, king of Gerar. That interview must surely have had some connection with the immediately preceding incident. And the precise link of connection may be found in what gave occasion to Abraham's remonstrance; he "reproved Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away" (ver. 25).

It appears from Abimelech's reply that he was not aware of this cause of complaint (ver. 26);—a circumstance not a

little remarkable, if the well in question was upon the ground occupied by Abraham's own household. But if it was a well that had belonged to Ishmael ;—especially if it was the well which God caused Hagar in her distress to see, and around which her son might naturally form his earliest settlement, Abimelech's ignorance and Abraham's anxiety are simply and naturally explained.

For we may assume some little time to have elapsed before this visit was paid by Abimelech to Abraham. And indeed but very little time would be needed to give Ishmael a position among the companies that roamed the desert. "God was with the lad ; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran ; and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt" (ver. 20, 21). He might thus very soon assume his place at the head of such a household, or such a troop of volunteers, as his daring spirit was sure to gather round him ; and all the sooner if he was still recognised as in alliance with Abraham, and still largely enjoyed the benefit of Abraham's patronage and name. And if we suppose him, as the captain of a band of archers, to have had an interest in the well which became matter of discussion between Abraham and Abimelech, the whole narrative becomes singularly vivid.

The King's servants have taken forcible possession of a well that has been frequented by a small tribe of adventurers. That is an affair in itself too insignificant to attract notice ; nor, in ignorance of the relation of the new tribe to Abraham, could Abimelech be expected to know or care much about the matter. But when Abraham explains that relation ; and, taking advantage of Abimelech's friendly visit, asks redress for the wrong that had been inadvertently done, he gains more for Ishmael than the mere recovery of the contested well. He secures to him a footing of acknowledged independence among the princes of the land.

For the ratification of the treaty by sacrifice has special

reference to the well which Abraham claims as having been dug by himself ; and which Abimelech accordingly cedes to him for ever (ver. 27-30). The well itself is called Beer-sheba --the well of the oath ; and it gives its name to the wilderness in which it is situated. It is not therefore carrying conjecture too far to suppose,—if our previous supposition as to the ownership of the well be allowed,—that the Ishmaelites may have had a share, not only in the covenant which was made at Beer-sheba, for the securing of the right of property that had been in dispute, but in the common worship also which was set up there,—for calling “on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God ” (ver. 32, 33).

XXVII.

ALLEGORY OF ISHMAEL AND ISAAC—THE TWO COVENANTS.

GEN. XXI. 9-12; JOHN VIII. 33-42; GAL. IV. 21-31.

“THESE things are an allegory,” says the apostle Paul, referring to the two sons that Abraham had—Ishmael and Isaac—and to the difference that there was between them, first in their respective births, and afterwards in the positions which they held in the family of the patriarch. “It is written that Abraham had two sons; the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory” (Gal. iv. 22-24). And the “allegory” is continued down to the expulsion of Ishmael. For the apostle adds, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless, what saith the Scripture? Cast out the bond woman and her son: for the son of the bond woman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bond woman, but of the free” (Gal. iv. 28-31).

This history, then, is allegorical; it was written with a view to its being allegorically interpreted and applied; and the facts which it registers were ordained and ordered with that view.

And yet the facts themselves are real; and they have a

real and literal importance apart from all allegory. As incidents illustrative of human nature and life generally—as incidents, in particular, bringing out the actual experience of believers in the circumstances in which the church was placed at the time—they are significant and valuable. Their significance and value, in that view, have been already opened up. They are not a mere allegory ; far from it ; they are the real actions of living men.

Still they are an allegory. And they are so, not because an inspired apostle has said it, but because that is their real character. Nor is it a character which belongs to them in common with all events that have happened or are happening upon earth. All things may be said, in one sense, to be allegorical ; all objects and all events. Not a blade of grass grows—not a sparrow falls to the ground—but an allegory may be made of it. But the peculiarity here is that the facts recorded have a spiritual meaning in themselves—substantially the same with the application which they suggest. Ishmael and Isaac—Mount Sinai and Mount Zion—Jerusalem which now is and Jerusalem which is above—are all of them contrasted pairs ; not artificially, but naturally. The principle of antagonism or contrast is the same throughout ; and it is exemplified completely at each stage. In Abraham's twofold seed—the one after the flesh, the other by special promise—we have the germ of the whole gospel as a system of free and sovereign grace. And the germ is only expanded and unfolded in the subsequent revelations of Sinai, and Zion, and Calvary.

Thus this transaction of the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar is an allegory ; not merely because Paul has used it allegorically, but because, in its very nature, it is evidently designed and fitted to be allegorical. “For these are the two covenants ;” they are allegorically or spiritually the two covenants—Ishmael and his mother Hagar representing the one—Isaac, again, typifying the other.

The contrast turns upon the distinction between Ishmael's

footing and Isaac's in the house or family of Abraham ; a distinction real and significant in itself, and therefore capable of being selected to represent, spiritually and by allegory, an equally real and significant distinction in the dealings of God with men under the two contrasted covenants.

For, in point of fact, the position of Ishmael in the household did differ widely from that of Isaac. It differed, especially, in two particulars ; in respect of the liberty enjoyed, and in respect of the permanency secured. The son of the bond woman had no such right of freedom, and no such sure standing, as belonged to the son of the free woman. His position was both servile in its character, and precarious in its tenure of duration. Still farther, this twofold difference between them is traced up to the manner of their respective births. The one was born according to the ordinary course of nature, the other by special promise. Whatever claim Ishmael had to be acknowledged as a member of Abraham's household rested merely on the ordinary laws of human nature and society. Isaac's claim, on the other hand, flowing from the terms of the divine promise, was very directly and immediately of God (Gal. iv. 22, 23).

Now all this is exactly analogous to what constitutes the characteristic difference between "the two covenants." For what are the two covenants ? They are the law and the gospel ;—the method of salvation by works and the method of salvation by grace ;—the one which says, *Do this and live*, and the other which says, *Believe and live*. And how are men connected with these two covenants respectively ? By birth ; in the one case natural ; in the other, spiritual, or by promise. Under the first covenant, men are naturally, by their very coming into the world, placed. Under the second covenant, they have no standing by nature, but only through grace alone.

But, still further, how do these two covenants tell upon the position which men occupy in the house or family of God ? That is the main and vital question.

What position can men have under the first or legal covenant? At the best, a position partaking much of the nature of a servitude, and precarious, moreover, being contingent on the issue of a probation or trial that cannot be indefinitely prolonged. For the legal covenant "gendereth to bondage" (Gal. iv. 24). It puts us and keeps us in the position of servants,—exactng high service under a heavy penalty,—and chafing the earnest soul with an increasing feeling of helpless subjection; and that too in very proportion to the spiritual insight it obtains into the excellency of the divine commandments, and the inevitable certainty and righteousness of divine judgment. Nor is that all. Servile as our footing is and must be under that covenant, it is precarious also. We abide in the house, in terms of it, only by sufferance and for a brief season. Any shortcoming in the fulfilment of the conditions of our continuance may at any moment be fatal to us; the time given to test our character and conduct may come to a swift and sudden end. And then the impending sentence may be deferred no longer; we must be cast out.

But now, suppose that we are in the house upon another footing; born, not after the flesh but by promise; and placed, therefore, under the evangelical covenant,—saved by grace through faith.

Then, in the first place, we are in the house, as not bond but free. We have the rights of freedom and the feelings of freedom. We have not to work for our liberty; we are already free. For the gospel-covenant giving us life, not conditionally upon certain terms prescribed, but gratuitously—for the taking, as men say—emancipates us on the instant from legal bondage; breaks the yoke of servile obligation, and severs the fetters of conscious guilt. The despairing worker under the law, the condemned criminal vainly toiling to win his release, is now pardoned freely; nay, more than pardoned; accepted and justified. At once, and once for all, he is placed upon a footing of free favour in the household which none can ever

challenge or question. For "if God be for us, who can be against us? It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?"

A second privilege, accordingly, of our birthright under the gospel-covenant, is the security of our position in the house. We are no longer in it as being merely tolerated, or put upon trial; we are in it as already and once for all approved. Our standing, upon the terms of the legal covenant of works, must always be precarious, contingent, and conditional. Even beings capable of fulfilling exactly all the terms of that covenant could never divest themselves altogether of the feeling that they might yet be cast out; they could never attain to the assurance of their "abiding ever." The unfallen angels themselves, who stood firm and faithful when their companions were lost, could not realise their own security, had they continued still to be placed upon probation. Some change must have taken place in their tenure of the divine favour after that sad catastrophe. They were elevated, doubtless, to a higher rank than had previously belonged to them, and brought into such a relationship of filial love to the Most High, as would carry with it a sense of safety they never otherwise could have enjoyed.*

But if even sinless creatures must feel their footing in the house insecure under the covenant of works, how much more the guilty! Any period of probation allowed to us for trying the experiment again of our ability to win life by our own obedience to the law, must be precarious indeed! What thanks, then, are due to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who receives us into his house, and takes us home to his bosom, on very different terms indeed! What praise for his free and sovereign grace, in the exercise of which, "of his own free-will he begetteth us by the word of his truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures;"—placing us upon a rock which neither earth nor hell can shake, and sur-

* See Lectures on the *Fatherhood of God*—Appendix i. and v.

rounding us with the shield of his everlasting favour, so that we are his for ever—never to be cast out !

Such, then, are the two covenants allegorically represented in the family of Abraham.

Hagar, in the apostle's view, typified, first Mount Sinai in Arabia, and, secondly, Jerusalem as it then was. In other words, she is the symbol, first of the legal dispensation, and, secondly, of the Jewish Church under that dispensation. Of the former, it is said that it gendereth to bondage ; of the latter, that she is in bondage with her children. For whatever might be the meaning of the old economy, spiritually apprehended, and whatever might be the intimations of gospel truth conveyed by it to a spiritually enlightened mind,—the law given by Moses was virtually and practically to the nation at large a method of salvation by works. As such, it laid upon the conscience a heavy load of unfulfilled obligation and uncanceled guilt ; and the people, looking for life according to its terms, were helplessly bound under its yoke of service and its sentence of condemnation. Their standing before God, therefore, is fitly compared to that of the bond-maid's son in the family. Thus, if Hagar represents the legal covenant, Ishmael naturally stands for those whose life, such as it is, flows from that covenant, and of whom the church, constituted according to that covenant, is the mother.

Over against that condition and channel of life the apostle sets one higher, freer, and incorruptible. And it is remarkable that in doing so, he partly loses sight of the symbol. He speaks not of Sarah; the proper antithesis to Hagar, in his ascending series of contrasts. But, reaching at once the summit, he brings the Jerusalem which is above into antagonism with the Jerusalem which now is. He confronts "the church of the first-born, which are written in heaven," with the church constituted in terms of the law.

For it is not any personal pre-eminence on the part of Sarah that entitles her son to a preference over Ishmael ; it is

simply his being the child by promise. It is as the child by promise that he is no servant, but emphatically the son, and therefore free. It is as the child by promise that he continues in the house, when the bondwoman and her son are cast out. So they whose mother is the Jerusalem which is above,—who hold their spiritual life and standing before God, not by derivation from any visible earthly church, but by fellowship with the spiritual economy of the unseen world above,—are born, not after the flesh, but by promise. Hence their title to a free footing in the house. That economy which is their spiritual mother is itself free; and it is the source of freedom. It is the system of free and sovereign grace; and, as such, it ushers into life a vast family of new-born and free-born souls. “It is the mother of us all.”

Barren as it may seem in the eye of sense; incapable of forming and preserving a collective or organised body of worshippers; greatly less efficacious for that end than “the Jerusalem that now is,” the apparatus of an earthly church, with its baptismal unity and outward pomp of service;—still the gospel plan of salvation by free-grace, carried home by the Holy Spirit, and laying hold of the conscience, the mind, the will, the heart,—the whole inner man, in short,—gives new life to multitudes of the lost race of mankind, and heralds into glory such a company of the redeemed, as no family, or tribe, or nation, could ever count as its own. “For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not; for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband” (Gal. iv. 27).

These are the countless throng described as meeting around the throne, and singing the song of Moses and the Lamb: “A great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb”

(Rev. vii. 9, 10). For they all disown any earthly Jerusalem as their mother, or any birth after the flesh as their title to life. They are all scions of a higher stock, deriving their spiritual being from a more heavenly source. They are born by promise ; “ By grace are they saved through faith, and that not of themselves, it is the gift of God.” And displacing and dispossessing all whose claim rests merely on their connection with the Jerusalem that now is,—they come forth at last to crown the Jerusalem that is above with the joyful acclamations of a united family, all gathered together into one in Christ, and all to the praise of the glory of his grace.

XXVIII.

THE TRIAL, TRIUMPH, AND REWARD OF
ABRAHAM'S FAITH.

GENESIS XXII.

By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac.—HEBREWS xi. 17-19.
Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered
Isaac his son upon the altar?—JAMES ii. 21-23.

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day ; and he saw it, and was glad.
JOHN viii. 56.

THE temptation of our Lord in the wilderness occurred immediately after his being declared to be the Son of God by the voice from heaven at his baptism (Matt. iii. 17). And all throughout, the temptation turns upon the privilege and prerogative which his being the Son of God implies. The tempter would fain persuade him to stand upon his right, as the Son of God,—to avail himself of the power belonging to him, in that character, for his own relief and his own aggrandisement,—and to snatch the inheritance to which he is entitled, as the Son whom God hath appointed heir of all things, without waiting the Father's time and fulfilling the Father's terms.

It is not Satan, but God, who "tempts Abraham," or puts him to the proof. So far there is a difference between the patriarch and the Saviour. The trial of the one is gracious and paternal ; the other has to stand a more fiery ordeal. Abraham has to listen to God, and obey ; Jesus has to encounter Satan, and resist.

In other respects, however, there is a remarkable analogy

between the two events. The father of Isaac is tried concerning his son, at the very time when that son has been emphatically owned from above as the heir. The Son of God is tempted upon the precise point of his sonship, just when it has been most signally and unequivocally acknowledged by the voice from heaven. Jesus is solicited to grasp impatiently the inheritance of his birthright, without passing through the preliminary stage of his deep humiliation and painful death. Abraham, again, is expected to acquiesce patiently in the putting off of the promises, even though the sacrifice of his beloved child, and the darkness of that child's tomb, be brought in between his hope and its fulfilment. In the one case, the question is,—Will the Lord Jesus anticipate prematurely the immunities and glories of the heritage ultimately designed for him? In the other case, the question is,—Will Abraham, on the part of his son, and as bound up with his son, consent to their being indefinitely postponed?

In this connection, the trial of the patriarch's faith may be viewed in two lights, as bringing out, first, the general principle of his faith, and, secondly, its more specific character and reward.

I. Let the general principle of Abraham's faith, as here exercised, be considered.

If we look at the bare fact of a father offering up his son in sacrifice, we can see little to distinguish the conduct of the patriarch from that of too many unhappy men who, in the dismal infatuation of superstitious fear, have "given their first-born for their transgressions—the fruit of their body for the sin of their souls." We search in vain in such a work of delusion for real faith;—that meek and holy trust which alone can be either honourable to God, or saving in its influence on the soul of man. A faith indeed of a certain kind we may discover—a faith in the existence and the power of God—a faith also in the terror of his unknown judgment. But it is such a faith as the devils have, who "believe and tremble." We

discover no sense of the divine love, no enlightened and manly confidence, in the father's severe and gloomy resolution. All in his soul must be doubt and darkness ; doubt inexplicable, darkness impenetrable. And in the horrid deed of blood at which we shudder,—by which the frantic parent would appease the wrath of an inexorable and implacable Deity,—we see no hopeful reliance on an unseen benefactor, but only abject and servile fear, grasping at a lie ! We must look, therefore, beyond the naked fact that “ Abraham offered up Isaac,” if we would rightly understand his faith.

Let us look, accordingly, to the occasion of the deed ;—“ Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac.” He made this sacrifice of parental affection at the express command of God, and sought, perhaps, to conciliate the favour of God, not indeed by the costliness of his offering, but by his ready and implicit submission to the divine will. Perhaps that may be a full account of Abraham's views and feelings in this act, as well as of the motives from which he acted. So far it may be so. He certainly did well to submit to the declared will of his Creator, however mysterious that will might be. We see in such obedience plain evidence of faith ; and of faith more enlightened in its nature than what we formerly observed in this sacrifice ;—faith in the righteous authority and moral government of God, who commands, and requires obedience to his commandments, however inexplicable they may be. But we do not see faith confiding, clinging, living ; for we might conceive of the heart of the forlorn parent inwardly rebelling, while his trembling and reluctant hand was stretched out to execute the stern decree. Again, therefore, we must take into account some other circumstances of the case, if we would truly estimate either the intense severity of Abraham's trial, or the unconquerable energy of his faith.

It was “ he that had received the promises ” who did all this. In full and faithful reliance on these promises, while as yet he was childless, Abraham left the land of his fathers, and

went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith in these promises, he sojourned as a stranger in the land which his descendants were to possess. On the birth of Hagar's son, despairing of any other child, he cries, "O that Ishmael might live before thee;" but when the long-expected heir is born at last, God, renewing the promises, expressly confines them to Isaac:—"In Isaac shall thy seed be called;" and as if to cut off all room for doubt, Ishmael is expelled altogether from the patriarch's house. All his hope now is centred exclusively in Isaac. Thus the promises which Abraham had received were all closely and necessarily bound up in the life of Isaac. And it was that "only begotten son"—in whom "his seed was to be called"—on whom the promises depended—whom, nevertheless, by faith in these very promises, he was ready at the command of God to offer up!

In the light of all these past proceedings on the part of God, we can now better understand the trial and the faith of Abraham, as they are recorded with such affecting simplicity;—"And it came to pass that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest. And get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering" (ver. 1, 2).

Was this, then, to be the end of all the patriarch's hopes?—this the fate of that son—the heir of so many promises, the child of such persevering faith, the destined father of a mighty people—in whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed? Was it thus that the old man, who had given up to God his youth, his friends, his home, his country, was to give up even Isaac, the child of his old age, the son of his love and his tears, his last and only stay?—to give him up, too, to the God in the fond faith of whose promises he had already sacrificed so much, and sacrificed all so vainly? Were all his long-cherished expectations to be thus cruelly mocked, at the very time when they seemed to be at last realised?

Yet we read of no hesitation—no natural regret—no

murmur—no thought even of remonstrance. The patriarch did not delay or deliberate an instant. He rose up early in the morning, and took Isaac his son, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then, leaving his attendants behind, and going on with Isaac alone, he “built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood”—and these arrangements being deliberately made, “Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (ver. 3-10).

Here let us pause to contemplate the patriarch at this tremendous moment. Let us observe the conflict between sense and faith.

In the eye of sense, he was by one rash act casting recklessly away the tardy fruit of a long life of obedience, and sternly sacrificing on the altar of his God the very hope which that God had taught him to cherish. Visions of grace and glory which had fed his soul during the years of his weary exile were fast vanishing from his view, and his high prospects were by his own hand now dashed for ever to the ground. Henceforth he was to linger out his days, childless and hopeless; his faith turned into despair, his joy into heaviness; since, in the excess of his self-denying devotion, he was obeying God, and yet, by the very act of obedience, putting utterly beyond his reach all the blessing which he had been so fully warranted by God himself to expect.

But, in the eye of faith, the venerable patriarch was still, even in this hour of terror, looking up to God, and reposing with unshaken confidence on that goodness which, during a long and harassed life, had never deceived or forsaken him. The same humble and holy trust in God, as his benefactor and his friend, which had thus far led him in safety, still triumphed over every doubt. Harsh as the decree might appear, he knew by much experience that God had never yet commanded him to his hurt; and he felt that the faithfulness of God must be as secure in the time to come as he had ever found it in time

past. The cloud, indeed, might be dark which veiled the divine proceedings from his view ; but it was not so dark as to cast a single shadow over his heart. He still trusted in the Lord as implicitly as when first he abandoned his father's house, casting himself on the Lord's protection. It mattered not to Abraham that by sacrificing his only son, he was, to all appearance, sacrificing his hope of a future people and a future Saviour to spring from him through that son. It mattered not that what God commanded seemed most inconsistent with what God had promised ; and that, according to human judgment, by obeying the command, he was making utterly void the promises. He presumed not to question the wisdom or truth of God. He simply confided in his faithfulness and love ; being well assured that God would reconcile all difficulties in the end, and justify his own ways, and accomplish his own word.

Thus, "against hope he believed in hope." The language of his obedience was the language of Job : "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."

Such was the spirit in which Abraham, on this occasion, unreservedly obeyed God ; such the principle of that faith by which he was rendered willing to offer up Isaac. He did not offer up Isaac in order that by so costly a sacrifice, he might purchase or propitiate the love of God ; nor in order that by so signal an instance of obedience to the divine will, he might merit the divine favour. He had already received from God "exceeding great and precious promises" which, from the first, he implicitly believed, and which, from the first, warranted him in placing full reliance on the love of God as already his. He did not seek to make out, by his obedience, a claim to the favour of God, for the promises of God had already given him a claim sufficiently clear and sure. From the first and all along, his faith was altogether independent of his obedience, resting simply and solely on the promises of God ; it was not the consequence but the cause, not the result but the motive,

of his obedience. It was not because he obeyed God that he felt himself entitled to trust in God ; but because he trusted in God, therefore he obeyed him. And his trust rested not on any thing he had done, or was willing to do, but exclusively on the promises he had received. That was the faith which made him cheerfully consent to leave the land of his birth, and carried him safely through all his trials—even the present trial as by fire ; not a vague, doubtful, contingent faith, timidly venturing to deprecate wrath, and hoping, by good behaviour, to find acceptance at last ; but a strong assurance of God's faithfulness, and a blessed sense of acceptance in his sight, springing out of the simple credit which he gave to the free and gracious promises made to him. Had he not had such faith in God, he never would have taken a single step in the pilgrimage of toil and trouble which God prescribed. But God promised, and Abraham believed ; God commanded, and Abraham obeyed. Long before this crowning instance of his obedience, Abraham believed ;—"He believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness ;"—a justifying righteousness was imputed to him. It could not, at that time, be on the ground of his own obedience that he felt himself warranted to believe, but simply on the ground of the promises. And still, to the last, even after this crowning instance of his obedience, his faith was of the same simple kind ; resting not on any service of his own, as if that were the condition of his peace and hope, but on the promises he had long before received, and still continued to hold fast.

Such is the explanation generally of Abraham's faith, as exemplified in the most memorable instance of its trial and its triumph. It is reliance, confidence, consent ; taking God at his word ; closing with his proposals ; resting upon his known character and revealed will ; laying hold of himself. Thus viewed, it has a double efficacy, as a bond of union and a motive of action. It unites him who exercises it to the Being upon whom he exercises it ; they are one ; and the oneness

implies justification, reconciliation, peace. So far faith is receptive, appropriating, acquiescing. But it is an active and moving force, as well as an acquiescent uniting embrace. It not only clings closely to the stem in which it finds its inner life ; it works powerfully upward and outward, bringing forth fruit. Hence, while in one view, it justifies by apprehending a righteousness not its own, in another, it justifies by verifying and vindicating itself. It justifies, as resting upon God and receiving the promises ; it justifies, also, as proving itself to be genuine, by obeying the command. By faith alone Abraham was justified as a sinner before God ; by faith alone he obtained acceptance in God's sight ; he believed, and he was accounted righteous. But his faith wrought by works ; believing the promises, he obeyed the commandment. And by this obedience, he was justified as a believer ; nor without it could he be justified in that character. By works, his faith was verified and completed ; and his acceptance, as the result of that faith, sealed and secured for ever. Thus we may understand the question of the apostle James—"Seest thou how his faith wrought by works, and by works was his faith made perfect?"—in harmony with what he immediately adds—"And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness" (Jas. ii. 22, 23). That very Scripture was fulfilled when "by faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac : and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called."

II. Let the specific character and reward of Abraham's faith be now considered. Its simplicity, viewed generally as a habit of reliance on the promises of God, and its power, as a motive of implicit obedience, are sufficiently brought out in the mere narrative itself of his trial relative to the offering up of Isaac. But we seem to obtain a deeper insight into its exercise and reward on this occasion, when we look at it in the light

of allusions made to it in other parts of Scripture. In particular, both the apostle Paul (Heb. xi. 19), and our blessed Lord (John viii. 5, 6), lead us to an understanding of the precise truths which Abraham believed, more definite than a perusal of the history, without the benefit of their commentaries, might of itself suggest. They speak to the question of the What? as well as the How? It is not now merely—How did Abraham believe? how strongly, unhesitatingly, unreservedly? but, What did Abraham believe? what facts and doctrines had such a hold over his convictions as to make him willing “against hope to believe in hope,” and to slay his only son—the very son “of whom it was said that in Isaac shall thy seed be called”?

One article of his creed is not obscurely indicated as having some bearing on this act of faith. He did it,—“accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure” (Heb. xi. 19). What gave him courage for the offering up of Isaac, was his “accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.”

But a question arises. Was it a return to this present life that Abraham had in his view, or a resurrection to life in the world to come? Did he contemplate the possibility of a miracle similar to that performed long after by our Lord in the case of Lazarus? Or, was he thinking of his lost child as Martha thought of her departed brother, when, in reply to the assurance of Jesus, “thy brother shall rise again,” she said, so simply—“I know that he shall rise again, on the resurrection, at the last day.”

It may have been upon some such event as the raising of Lazarus that Abraham reckoned. The God who commanded him, at one instant, to slay his son, was able the very next to restore him again to his arms. Abraham could not doubt that. So far, this may appear at first sight a credible and consistent enough account of his conduct.

But on farther consideration, it will probably be felt by most men to savour somewhat of refinement ; it makes the apostle's explanation of the patriarch's faith somewhat far-fetched and artificial. Such a raising of Isaac to life again, was not a natural idea to enter into the mind of Abraham ; if it had, it would have been fitted to give rather an unmeaning character to the whole scene in his eyes. The intense reality of it is upon this supposition gone ; and a sort of theatrical stroke, or piece of stage effect, is substituted in its stead. We have the impression that God is not acting in his usual manner, or in a way altogether worthy of himself, in thus commanding a deed to be done, on the implied understanding that he is instantly to undo it. And Abraham putting his son to death upon the faith of God being able to restore him again to life, is subjected to a physical rather than a moral trial—to the mere instinctive pain of embruing his hands in kindred blood, rather than to any exercise of the higher and more spiritual faculties or affections of his soul. Surely, when having built the altar and laid the wood in order, and having bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood, the venerable father stretches forth his hand, and takes the knife to slay his son—it is with no expectation of ever seeing him in this world again ; it is a long last look of love that he casts upon that dear face, and a fond and final farewell that he sadly whispers in that ear, as he nerves his hand for the fatal, the irrevocable stroke !

And then, on the other hand, the idea of a resurrection to life in a future state was as familiar to Abraham, as that of a return from death in this world must have been strange and inconceivable. Had any one sought to encourage him concerning his son, by telling him that it was not impossible for God to reanimate the mangled body, and recall the departed spirit ; had some Eliphaz, or Bildad, or Zophar been schooling him to patience by some such discourse on the divine omnipotence, and the abstract possibility of a dead man being

restored to life ; Abraham, like Job, might have winced under the commonplaces of his miserable comforters ; but as to the notion they would insinuate into his imagination,—he must have rejected it as a temptation, not from God, but from Satan ; he must have felt it to be a fond delusion and a dream.

But it could not “be thought” by him “a thing incredible that God should raise the dead” (Acts xxvi. 8). On the contrary, that is “the very hope of the promise made of God unto the Fathers,” as Paul speaks in his defence before Agrippa ;—“unto which promise,” he adds, “our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come” (Acts xxvi. 7). In the very passage, moreover, in which his reference to the sacrifice of Isaac occurs, he celebrates the faith of the patriarchs generally, and especially the faith of Abraham, as a faith which made them feel that they were strangers and pilgrims in the land, looking for a more permanent order of things beyond the tomb (Heb. xi. 9-16). And it is in immediate connection with this explanation of the hope which animated Abraham, as well as all that went before him in the heavenly race, that the apostle introduces, as a specimen and choice example of it, the incident of the offering up of Isaac.

Surely, therefore, we may conclude, on all these grounds, that what Abraham in this instance relied on, was not generally the power of God to raise the dead, but specially his power to fulfil his promise about the resurrection and the inheritance of the world to come. It was no vague notion of the divine omnipotence,—or of God being able to do any thing, however strange,—that sustained the patriarch ; but a hope far more express and unequivocal ; a hope having respect unequivocally to the world to come.

Thus veiwed, the trial of Abraham's faith receives a meaning not perceived before.

He had been warned, that with respect to himself personally, the promise of “the land which God was to show him”

(Gen. xii. 1) ;—"the place which he should after receive as an inheritance" (Heb. xi. 8) ;—the very promise on the faith of which he left the country of his birth and the home of his fathers ;—was to have its fulfilment in the resurrection state, or in the world to come. He had been told that he should "go to his fathers in peace, and be buried in a good old age," and that several generations must elapse before the land was to be taken from its present possessors and vacated for his posterity (Gen. xv. 15, 16). Thus far he had been taught to abandon the prospect of his being himself put in possession of the promised inheritance on this side of time, and had been led to regard it as a hope for eternity. But he might still be clinging to the present—the seen and temporal—in reference to his seed. Contented to die himself before receiving the promised inheritance, he might still be dwelling on the bright future that stretched itself out before his children in the land. And now that Isaac was born, he might be willing to say, as Simeon said, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,"—not from any spiritual apprehension of eternal things, but because he could now leave behind him one who, even in a temporal point of view, might elevate his name and lineage among the families of men.

The command to offer up Isaac is the test of his faith upon this very point. Is he willing, not merely to have his own inheritance postponed till after the resurrection, but the inheritance of his seed also ? Can he bear to have, not only his own expectation, but that of Isaac, deferred to the future state ?

He can ; for he believes in the resurrection. He "accounts that God is able to raise him up, even from the dead." He can forego, therefore, all his fond imagination of being the founder of a family and father of a great nation, in this present world. He can consent to the arrangement that after his decease there is to be no farther trace of him excepting only in the line of Ishmael that has been so unequivocally disowned.

He is to die in a good old age ; and it may be that he is to survive the son of whom it has been said, " In Isaac shall thy seed be called." After his decease, there may be no genuine representative of his house left behind ; and to the end of time it may be matter of wonder and reproach that neither he, nor any child of his, has ever actually got possession of the inheritance, on the faith of which he went out, " not knowing whither he went." But none of these things move Abraham. He looks not to the things which are seen and temporal, but to the things which are unseen and eternal ; being well assured that " if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens " (2 Cor. iv. 18 ; v. 1).

Great indeed, in this view, is the faith of Abraham—great almost beyond our power of sympathy or insight. And yet we may partly measure it by the universal instinct which prompts men to aim at leaving a name, or building a house, that shall survive their own removal. One of the most painful thoughts connected with death is that " the place which once knew us shall know us no more ; " and one of the strongest natural desires in a parent's bosom is to live again in his children. Not a few of us can make up our minds to our own obscurity ; but we yearn after distinction in the race we are to leave behind. It is often the last weakness even of a spiritual man to cherish such prospects of posthumous renown ; and it is no trifling trial of his spirituality when he must submit to his not having, either in his own person, or in his posterity, a high position in the world. But if this is trying to a man having only ordinary expectations in this life, what must it have been to Abraham ? No common parent is he ; nor is it any common hope that is bound up with the son for whose birth he has waited so long. The child of promise is the heir of no common birthright. A glory coextensive with the blessing of all the families of the earth is in store for his seed ; a mighty nation is to hail him as their honoured sire ; and the

whole world is to own him as the source or channel of its regeneration.

And are the whole of these bright anticipations to stand over till time gives place to eternity? Is the patriarch, after having been taught to see glorious visions of temporal greatness and spiritual good hovering over the head of his dear child,—visions reaching to long ages and embracing the entire family of man,—not only to depart himself ere they are realised, but to have the realisation of them made impossible in the present world, and possible only in the world to come?

Then so be it. "Lord, not my will but thine be done." Abraham believes that God is able to raise the dead; and therefore he is willing to have the entire inheritance of himself and of his seed laid up in that unseen and eternal heavenly state to which the faithful dead are to be raised. His faith in the resurrection reconciles him to the loss of all his possessions and prospects in the life that now is, and enables him to lay hold of the treasure that is in heaven.

Such, then, is the precise and specific character of Abraham's faith, as brought out in the greatest trial it had to undergo. It embraces the doctrine of the resurrection. And it embraces that doctrine with a cordial preference of the state that is beyond the resurrection over the state that is on this side of it. There is thus plain evidence in it of that transference of the affections from earth to heaven, which a divine agency alone can effect. It obtains accordingly a suitable as well as signal reward. Being made perfect by works—having its consummation in the act of obedience which it prompted—it has its appropriate and congenial recompense also in that very act itself. He "received" Isaac "from the dead, in a figure" (Heb. xi. 19). He "saw the day of Christ, and was glad" (John viii. 56).

In the first place, "he received Isaac from the dead, in a figure." In the signal and seasonable deliverance of his son he had a vivid representation of the resurrection which

he had believed that God was able to effect. To all intents and purposes, Isaac had been dead, and was now alive from the dead. It was an emphatic rehearsal of the real and literal resurrection; nor could the patriarch, having been thus brought to feel the power of the world to come, ever afterwards lose the vivid sight and sense he had got of its eternal realities. Isaac has been spared to him; and, in acknowledgment of his obedient faith, the promises are renewed to him of a numerous family through Isaac, as well as of the Saviour in whom all the nations of the earth are to be blessed (ver. 15-18). But the blessings thus graciously secured to him in time, must have a peculiar meaning now in his eyes, when viewed in the light of the resurrection and of eternity. For the lesson he has been taught is really this;—that the promises reach beyond this present life, and have their chief fulfilment in the life to come; that, even if he should see no fulfilment of them here, this need not surprise or grieve him, since there is a greater and better fulfilment of them in reserve hereafter; and that any fulfilment of them he may see on earth is altogether subordinate to the fulfilment awaiting him in heaven. The birthright of which Isaac is the heir, is now seen to have its principal seat—not in this world, where all is change, and where, in a moment, the child of promise may be suddenly cut off—but in the world to come, where there is no more sorrow or separation, because there is in it no more sin.

Thus, in the second place, “Abraham saw the day of Christ” in this transaction, “and was glad.” For we can scarcely doubt that it is to this transaction that the Lord refers in his controversy with the Jews on the subject of their boast of liberty, and their standing in the house or family of God (John viii. 34-59).*

It is an animated controversy. The Lord drives them back from one point of defence to another. He proves that

* See Lectures on the *Fatherhood of God*, Appendix v.

they are the servants of sin ; so that they can have no footing but that of servants in relation to God. He meets their proud boast of descent from Abraham, by an appeal to their entire want of sympathy with Abraham. He meets their still prouder boast of having God as their father, by the exposure of their family-likeness, not to God, but to Satan. And at last, in answer to their challenge—"Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead?"—he announces himself as the object of Abraham's faith: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John viii. 56).

Now, the day of Christ which Abraham "rejoiced"—or earnestly desired—to see, must be the day of which he himself speaks; "I must work the work of him that sent me while it is day." It is the day of his sojourn on earth; when he glorified his Father, and finished the work given him to do. More particularly, it is the day on which his work was finished, and he was himself acknowledged, accepted, and glorified by the Father; according to the prophecy of the second psalm—"Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." For "this day," as the apostle Paul expressly explains it, is the day on which God "raised up Jesus again" (Acts xiii. 33). That is the day of Christ which Abraham desired, and was permitted, to see.

But the sight which he longed to have of it must have been something more than was ordinarily granted to the saints and patriarchs of old. They, indeed, living by faith in a Saviour yet to come, looked forward to his day, and anticipated the time when the Seed of the woman should bruise the head of the serpent. But what the Lord refers to would seem to have been the peculiar privilege of Abraham; for Abraham is very specially represented as desiring to see "the day of Christ;" and as on some special occasion seeing it, and being fully gratified with the sight.

But what occasion in the history of Abraham can we fix

upon more probably than the occasion now before us? And does it not give a very beautiful significancy to that most mysterious transaction, if we regard it as the appointed means of affording to Abraham that glad sight of "the day of Christ" for which he had longed and prayed? Regarded in no other light than as a trial of Abraham's faith, the narrative of the offering up of his son Isaac is abundantly interesting and affecting. But it becomes still more so, if we look at it in the light of our blessed Lord's commentary.

Abraham had desired to see "the day of Christ;" and a sight of it, more full and distinct than believers of that time ordinarily had, is to be granted to him. He is to see in vivid reality the details of that event, the general outline of which alone was then communicated to others. For this end, he is to stand on Mount Moriah, which, as some think, is the very spot subsequently called the hill of Calvary. And he is to behold the scene of the atonement accomplished there.

He beholds it in a threefold figure. First of all, when he takes the knife, and stretches forth his hand to slay his son, he is made to realise the intensity of the love of him who spared not his own Son, but gave him up even to the death. Again, secondly, in the ram provided for Isaac's release, there is a vivid representation of the great principle of the sacrifice of Christ—the principle of substitution. A ransom is found for the doomed and condemned—an acceptable victim is put in their place. But, thirdly and especially, in the reception of Isaac again by Abraham virtually from the dead, and his welcome restoration to his father's embrace;—not, however, without a sacrifice, not without blood;—the resurrection of the Son of God, and his return to the bosom of the Father—after really undergoing that death which Isaac underwent only in a figure—might be clearly and strikingly discerned. And in Christ's resurrection, his own resurrection also was involved, as well as the resurrection of all his true children, to the inheritance of eternal glory.

Thus the very transaction which so severely tried the faith of Abraham showed him all that his faith longed so much to see. He saw the day of Christ—the day of his humiliation and triumph—not darkly and dimly as others then saw it, but clearly, distinctly, vividly. He saw the very way in which the salvation of man was to be accomplished, and the blessing purchased for all the families of the earth, by the atoning death and glorious resurrection of the beloved Son of God. And seeing thus gladly the day of Christ, he saw Christ himself as the Living One ;—dead indeed, and sacrificed once for all, yet still living, and by his very death enabled to be the author of life to the “many sons whom he bringeth unto glory” (Heb. ii. 10).

These, then, are the gracious fruits of this trial of Abraham's faith. They are such as the trial of our faith also may yield. For we are tried in the very same way with him. We are called to give up to God the desire of our eyes—the beloved of our hearts—some dear partner, or child, or friend, around whose brow, in our fond esteem, the halo of many a bright anticipation shone. It is a bitter parting ; and it is hard to acquiesce in it,—to consent to it. But it is God's will ; and we submit. And what sustains us, but our accounting that God is able to raise him from the dead ? Yes ; let him depart to be with Christ—and let the once beauteous body rot in the silent tomb to which my own hand consigns it. I know he is not lost after all. My own inheritance now is not on earth but in heaven ; and in heaven he will rejoin me again. For myself and for him, I place all my hope beyond the grave. It is but a little while. “This corruptible must put on incorruption.” “The Lord shall appear, and all that are his shall appear with him in glory.”

Is my heart wrung with the anguish of that parting hour ? Is the bitterness of death felt in my desolate home, and my still more desolate heart ? Ah ! do I not now enter as I never

did before—with a new insight and new sympathy—into the agony of the death endured by him who bore my sins in his own body on the tree? And as I lift my thoughts from this shadowy scene to the region of realities, how does my bosom burn with adoring gratitude and love to that Saviour who has spoiled death of its sting, and the grave of its victory,—who has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light!

He calls me to suffer with him now, that we may be “glorified together” hereafter. He would have me to be partaker of his cross, that he may make me partaker of his crown. Through his own day of suffering and shame, issuing in his return to the Father’s bosom, he summons me to the hope of that heaven where he dwells. Am I contented to have all my hope there—and there only? Can I bear to have my portion postponed—my expectation deferred—till the hour when time gives place to eternity? Can I resign myself to the surrender of every thing dearest to me here below—friendship, love, happiness,—honour, wealth,—a husband’s or a wife’s embrace,—a child’s fond smile,—a friend’s sweet counsel,—not in gloomy submission to fate;—not in stoical and stubborn pride;—not in heartless worldly unconcern;—but in firm reliance upon that blessed Redeemer, who has himself passed through much tribulation, and gone to prepare a place for me among the many mansions of his Father’s house? And he cometh again,—his risen saints all with him,—to receive me to himself, that I may be with him for ever! Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

XXIX.

TIDINGS FROM HOME—THEIR CONNECTION WITH
SARAH'S DEATH AND ISAAC'S MARRIAGE.

GENESIS XXII. 20-24; XXIII. XXIV.

THE three events recorded in the end of the 22d, in the 23d, and in the 24th chapters respectively, are more nearly connected than might at first sight appear; they have all a common bearing on the settlement of Abraham's family in the line of Isaac. They form the last chain that binds the race from which the father of the faithful sprung, with the race that is to spring from him. First, the patriarch hears news of his kindred whom he left behind when he began to be a pilgrim (xxii. 20-24). Secondly, the tent of Sarah is made sadly vacant (xxiii.) And thirdly, as the issue of both events, a wife is found for Isaac (xxiv.) It is a kind of historical syllogism, with its two suggestive premises and its legitimate conclusion;—not that there is any thing formal or artificial in the arrangement;—on the contrary, the story is told so naturally, and as it were unconsciously, that it requires a clue to trace the under-current of connection throughout.

The mention, for instance, of Abraham's relatives, at the close of the 22d chapter, seems to ordinary readers unmeaning and abrupt. It has nothing at all to do with the preceding narrative;—although the chance of chapters has bound it to that narrative in modern editions and translations. The previous act in the divine drama is complete; the incident on Mount Moriah being its catastrophe and close. An entirely

new act begins at the twentieth verse ; the act of which the climax is the marriage of Isaac. And it has its appropriate successive scenes :—the first, common and preliminary, the household receiving apparently indifferent intelligence ; the second, tender and pathetic, implying deep domestic woe ; and the third, affording a welcome relief, in the advantage taken of the news that came first, and the consolation administered to the sorrow that followed after. In this connection, let the three scenes be successively considered.

I. The tidings from the old home are briefly narrated (chap. xxii. 20-24) :—“And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor ; Huz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. And Bethuel begat Rebekah : these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.”

It is a catalogue of strange and hard names that we have here. But it is introduced for a particular purpose, and that no unimportant one. For the information thus brought to Abraham, respecting the friends he had so long ago left behind in the country from which he migrated, has more in it than a mere matter of ordinary domestic intelligence might seem to imply. It has reference to the transaction afterwards recorded ;—the approaching marriage of Isaac.

Doubtless, in itself, simply as reminding him of those from whom he had now been parted for more than half-a-century, the tidings could not fail to be welcome to his affectionate heart. In the wandering and unsettled life which he led, so far from his father’s house,—with the rare and difficult means of communication which then existed,—he seldom, or more probably never, during all this interval, had heard any certain report of his father’s household—his kinsmen according to the

flesh. The yearnings of that natural affection which he had been willing to subordinate to the command of him in whom he believed, but which had never been extinguished or diminished, must have been gratified by hearing of his brother's welfare ;—for, “as cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”

But the particular juncture at which this message came, must have made it to him and to his partner peculiarly seasonable.

Isaac was now growing to man's estate ; and his parents were very naturally beginning to be anxious about his permanent establishment in life. They felt the necessity of the sacred family, the chosen seed, being kept separate and distinct from the surrounding worldly tribes. They shrank from connecting their son with even the best of the households among whom they dwelt. They dreaded the contagious influence of the growing impiety and corruption of the nations ; and they believed that it was God's purpose and desire that they should not intermingle or intermarry with the people of the land. But, at the same time, what could they do ? Here they were, isolated and secluded ; and it might seem that, in the circumstances, neither they nor their son had any choice.

Considerations like these must have cost the believing parents of Isaac many an uneasy thought. And as they could not but know that they must themselves ere long be removed, the situation of their son, so soon to be left alone in the world, must have been the frequent subject of their earnest communings and their united prayers.

At the right time, the apparently casual intelligence reaches them ;—“And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor ;” (xxii. 20)—among the rest, “Bethuel,” who has become the father of “Rebekah” (ver. 23).

Is this not a hint from heaven—to relieve their anxiety and direct their conduct ?

To Sarah, in particular, now about to depart, how gracious is this kindness of the Lord! Her last and only care is removed. She owns the Lord's hand—leading her and her household by a way that she knew not. She may commit all to God—to him who “will provide” (Gen. xxii. 14)—whether it be a lamb for a burnt-offering, or a chosen handmaid to be a mother in Israel. She, too, sees “the day of Christ” afar off. Every obstacle to the fulfilment of the promise being taken away—“her eyes see the salvation of God.” She is contented. “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.” It is all well. “The Lord will provide.”

Thus we trace a connection between the short genealogy of Nahor's family in Mesopotamia, and the eventful history of Abraham and his household in Canaan. Nor is the connection to be regarded as a strained or far-fetched one. On the contrary, it is essential to the right understanding of what otherwise must be felt to be an unseasonable and unmeaning interruption in the narrative. And a lesson may be derived from the analogy that is to be traced, in reference to this particular, between the word and the providence of God. For in actual life, many instances be noticed of incidents occurring, which at the time appear to be very casual and insignificant—parenthetical and insulated circumstances, coming in as it were by the way, in the onward course of more important events—which ere long, however, are found to have a material bearing upon what God in his providence is about to bring to pass? A mere flying rumour may drop seed that is soon to spring up and bear fruit—fruit for good or for evil—that may endure even beyond this present world and reach into eternity. The whole complexion of a man's life may be affected by an occurrence, as slight and seemingly immaterial, as “its being told Abraham” that his brother had had children born to him.

Surely, therefore, it is the part of wisdom as well as of

devotion, if we believe in the exercise of a particular providence on the part of God over human affairs, not hastily to conclude concerning any thing that befalls us, or any thing that we happen to learn—however trivial and accidental it may seem to be—that it is unworthy of remark or of remembrance. Let us rather be on the watch “to regard the works of the Lord and the operation of his hands,”—to notice the minute evidences of design which even the details of his dealings with us afford. For we may be sure that every thing which he does, or which he would have us to know that he has done, has a meaning ; which we “ may not know now, but which we shall know hereafter ” (John xiii. 7). “ Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord ” (Ps. cvii. 43).

XXX.

THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF A PRINCESS.

GENESIS XXIII.

IN the announcement of Sarah's age at her death, the minute and literal criticism of the Jewish expositors takes notice of a peculiarity of expression. Exactly rendered, the text speaks, not of the life, but of the lives of Sarah: "Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life" or lives "of Sarah" (ver. 1). To these fanciful and ingenious fabulists, the slightest hint is enough: and accordingly they tell us of three lives, or stages of life, in Sarah's career, distinguished according to the numbers employed in summing up the whole;—"a hundred; and seven; and twenty." The conceit is childish, if not profane.

There is, however, some reason to suppose that in the latter years of her pilgrimage, she renewed miraculously her youthful beauty, as well as her youthful capacity of conceiving seed, when the time for the birth of Isaac drew near;—what passed in Abimelech's land may be some confirmation of that idea. Nor is it unimportant to observe that it is not said of Sarah at her death, as it is usually said of the other patriarchs, and as it is said at a former period of herself, that she was "well stricken in age." Moses, we are told, retained the freshness of manhood to the close of his extreme old age—"his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deut. xxxiv. 7). Sarah, in her old age, "received strength" (Hebrews xi. 11); and it

may be that she continued in the enjoyment of that strength, and in her restored prime of life, to the last.

That her end was blessed, we cannot doubt. She was, indeed, highly favoured among women ; second only to the mother of our Lord—of whom, indeed, in the extraordinary birth of Isaac, she was an evident type, as Isaac himself prefigured the favoured virgin's Son. Her name was significant of her character and fame. To Abraham, from the beginning of his pilgrimage, she was "Sarai,—my princess ;" so he delighted affectionately to honour her. To the church at large, the vast multitude of Abraham's believing children, she is "Sarah—the princess ;"—to whom, as to a princess, they are gratefully to look, and whom in all generations they are to call blessed (chap. xvii. 16, 17).

Yet the tenor of Sarah's life was very private, unostentatious, and unassuming. She tarried at home. The leading features of her character which the word of inspiration commends are these:—her holy and unadorned simplicity ; her meek and quiet spirit—an ornament in the sight of God of great price ; and her believing and loving subjection to a believing and loving husband (1 Pet. iii. 1-6). She was devoted to Abraham ; not in the mere blindness of natural and fond affection, but with an intelligent apprehension and appreciation of his high standing, as the friend of God and the heir of the covenant. She did not indeed always act wisely. Her false step in giving Hagar to Abraham, through despair of the fulfilment of God's promise—her harshness in resenting the frowardness of her maid—her incredulous laughter at the announcement of the Angel—her attempt, in the confusion occasioned by the Angel's sudden discovery of her offence, to prevaricate and to deny it,—these are blemishes over which we may breathe a sigh. Let devout women by all means be warned against such sins, and against the unbelief which is their source. In his very commendation of Sarah, the apostle points to what her daughters are to avoid, as well as what

they are to imitate, in her example. He makes mention of that "amazement of fear" which led her to conceal by a falsehood the deviation from "well-doing" into which she had been betrayed, and so to add sin to sin (1 Pet. iii. 6). Still, these errors need not detract altogether from the sincerity of her faith, and her meek devotedness to her husband,—or rather to him in whom both she and her husband believed.

For she too walked by faith, having favour with God, and waiting for his salvation. In faith, being like-minded with Abraham, she left her early home and her father's house. In faith, she bore him company through the long years of his exile, cheering him amid many troubles, and upholding him under many disappointments. Through faith she received strength to conceive seed; and afterwards, when even Abraham himself was perhaps too much divided between the child after the flesh and the child by promise—between his own righteousness and that of God—between the covenant of legal bondage and the covenant of grace and liberty,—she seems to have had a more spiritual discernment than he had. She believed salvation to be in the line of Isaac alone; and her counsel, to "cast out the bondwoman and her son," obtained the sanction of God himself. Finally, she stands enrolled among those "of whom the world was not worthy;" and it is in immediate connection with her, and with "the strength she received to bear seed because she judged him faithful who had promised," that the apostle introduces his comprehensive testimony to the humble walk and high hope of all the patriarchs;—"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country" (Heb. xi. 11-14).

Such was Sarah, living in faith and dying in faith; whose daughters the matrons of Israel are,—even as their husbands

are the children of faithful Abraham. The two "dwelt with one another according to knowledge, being heirs together of the grace of life," so that their "prayers were not hindered" (1 Pet. iii. 7). Such is the Scriptural model of marriage in the Lord, and such the high and holy honour that is to be attached to that estate, among all Abraham's sons and Sarah's daughters.

Thus "Sarah died in Kirjath-arba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her" (ver. 2).

From the expression in this second verse, "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her," it has been supposed by some that he was absent at the time of his wife's death. At this period, in consequence of the size of his household, the multitude of his cattle, and the difficulty of removing them all at once, he very probably had two establishments; the one at Beersheba and the other at Hebron; both on the borders of the territory of the Philistines, and the country of Abimelech, king of Gerar; and both within the limits of the promised land. His affairs having called him away from Hebron, he found, on his return,—recalled by the tidings of his beloved partner's illness,—that all was already over; and that his house being turned into a house of mourning, nothing now remained for him but to weep!

To watch beside the bed where parting life is laid—to cool the throbbing brow and smooth the restless pillow—to whisper soothing words of consolation and catch the latest breath of expiring love—to press the cold hand, and close the eye now bright no more,—such offices of tenderness even the breaking heart would not forego. It is a sacred privilege to render them. It is a sad aggravation of the pain of separation to be away when they fall to be paid.

Whether Abraham was called to endure this additional bitterness of sorrow or not, we cannot tell. The phrase, "he

came," is not conclusive. It may mean merely that he left his own tent, or private chamber, and betook himself to that of his deceased wife, to mourn,—or generally, that he set himself to discharge the usual functions of a mourner. But at all events, it is clear that he gave himself to this exercise of mourning ;—and that he did so of deliberate purpose and systematically.

There is much to be learned from this. Mourning for the dead is natural. When the tie of mutual affection is severed by the rude hand of the destroyer, tears spontaneously flow. It is a relief, it is an indulgence to weep—to weep for the dead ! But on what footing does this mourning for the dead stand, according to the estimate of faith and the rule of godliness ? Is it merely permitted—tolerated and allowed—as an infirmity ? That would be much. The assurance that he may sorrow without sinning, is an unspeakable consolation to the believer in his bereavement. The fact that Abraham “came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her,”—still more the fact that “Jesus wept,”—is as oil poured into the wounds of the heart’s lacerated and torn affections. But that is not all. Still more complete—still more wonderful—is the adaptation of the Gospel to man’s nature and man’s trials. The patriarch evidently made conscience of his mourning. He gave himself to the exercise, not merely as to a privilege but as to a duty. His sighs and tears were not simply regarded by him as lawful, for the relief of his overcharged and overburdened soul ;—even into this department of his experience he carried his sense of obligation. In a religious and spiritual sense, he made a business of his grief. He went about the indulgence of it as a work of faith ; he allotted to it a fixed and definite time ; he came to Sarah’s tent for the express purpose ; he gave up for this work his other avocations and his other employments. His occupation was “to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.”

There is therefore a time to weep ; there is a time to mourn. There is a season during which to mourn and weep

is not merely the allowed license, or tolerated weakness, of the believer, but his proper business—the very exercise to which he is called. This instance of Abraham is not only a warrant and precedent, but a binding and authoritative example. It not merely sanctions a liberty ; it imposes an obligation.

The custom, indeed, of all ages and nations has borne testimony to the obligation. At all times and in all places, the usage of society—ancient as well as modern—eastern and western alike—has prescribed a certain period and certain forms of mourning. The mourner is expected to seclude himself for a while from the tumult and gaiety of life, and to be conversant with symbols significant of sorrow. To transgress these rules is accounted unseemly and unfeeling. To rush from a domestic deathbed to the public gaze of the garish world, whether in the way of business, or in pursuit of pleasure and excitement, is confessedly an outrage on the common decencies of society, as well as on all the sympathies of our social nature. Doubtless, the usage may become a form—a mockery—a farce. The rueful look—the managed tears—the ostentatious solitude and elaborate retirement—the weeds and trappings—the sighs and sentiments,—all may be mere ceremony—as repulsive to true delicacy of taste and feeling, as were the cuttings and howlings of the hired mourners at heathen funerals of old. Still, the practice has its foundation, not only in the natural sense and sensibility of mankind, but in reason and in faith. It is in itself right. It is fitted to serve a spiritual and sacred end ; if only in a becoming spirit we consider in connection with it, first the past, and secondly the future.

Thus as to the past,—in looking back along the vista of years, there is pregnant matter for most profitable meditation. One natural thought may perhaps be suffered for a moment—the thought that had it been possible, we would have had the event itself, or some of its circumstances, differently ordered. But in this, let there be no sinful reproaching, either of the

decree of Heaven, or of second causes and subordinate accidents on earth. Let us look on the past—not in discontent or melancholy musing merely—but in deep self-abasement and lowly gratitude.

Ah! what questions, reaching far back in life's varied history, does the breaking of a fond tie of brotherhood force on the startled memory? How old is that now broken tie? When and how was it first recognised as a tie of nature, or formed as a tie of love? When and how did it become a tie closer still,—a tie of grace? For how many years,—for what portion of a century,—a quarter, or a half, or more,—has the tie subsisted? And during all that period how have you lived and walked together,—you and the loved one now gone to return no more? You thought that you dwelt together in unity; that you had enough of mutual esteem and love; that you had few occasions of difference or dissension, and little or no unkindness with which to reproach one another. The current of your natural affection,—your wedded happiness—your parental tenderness—your social joy—flowed smoothly and equably along. There might be occasional waves and eddies; but there was no serious obstacle to trouble or to break the stream. Do you think so now? Do no bitter regrets and recollections haunt you? Is there no painful handwriting on the wall? Especially in regard to your spiritual fellowship together, have you no uneasy misgivings?

It is a humbling lesson which this mourning may teach,—pricking the conscience with a new sense of sin,—touching the heart with a profounder feeling of the vanity of all earthly things. But it is not all dreariness and woe. Think of the way by which God has led you and your partner together, and trace his fatherly hand in his manifold dealings with you. Review and revive, in your saddened memory, scenes of tenderness long past and gone; hours, perhaps, of holy and blessed communion in the Lord; days when you and your beloved went up to God's house, taking sweet counsel together; times

of refreshing, when "your souls prospered and were in health," and you were knit one to another, as by a new bond of heaven's own love! Instead of dwelling only on what is dark and gloomy in the lines which recollection sadly traces, allow the brighter spots to refresh your eye. Recall the Lord's goodness towards those whom you have lost;—the gifts with which they were endowed, the services they were enabled to render to the commonwealth or the church, the long lives of usefulness they were permitted to lead on earth, and the indications their last days may have afforded of mellow ripeness for heaven. So you will be stirred up to new aspirations of faith and prayer, that you may be "followers of them who, through faith and patience, have inherited the promises" (Heb. vi. 12); and that you may meet them at last, when "the Lord shall appear," and all that are his "shall appear with him in glory" (Col. iii. 4).

The future, however, as well as the past, is to occupy the thoughts in the season of mourning. We are to look forward, as Abraham was fain to do.

His happiness on earth was now well nigh at an end. The delight of his eyes, the beloved of his heart, is no longer fair and pleasant to look upon. She can no more share his dwelling. The green earth must cover what else would be offensive;—"Let me bury my dead out of my sight" (ver. 4).

And is this, then, all? Is this the close of that long and endearing fellowship of Abraham and Sarah in the Lord? Has it passed away "as a tale that is told?" Is Abraham to put away his dead for ever? Is he to have done with this severed tie of sanctified love as with a broken potsherd, or with water spilt on the ground?

That can scarcely be. For, in the first place, he is very careful of the lifeless body; he is much concerned about its being decently disposed of. Why should he be so, unless that body is to live again? Why is he so anxious for the comely

interment of what, to the eye of sense, is but a mass of clay? Why is the very dust of his beloved so dear to him?—her body so sacred, and to be sacredly handled? It is not mere sentiment and fancy, but rather strong and hopeful faith. This thy sister, thy spouse, shall rise again. Her remains, therefore, may well be precious in thy esteem.

Such, probably, is the origin of that care for the burial of the dead which has prevailed so universally from the earliest ages among all men. It is to be traced to the primeval and traditionary revelation of a resurrection. The practice, no doubt, degenerated into a superstition;—as witness the ceremonies connected with the burning and embalming of the lifeless remains of departed friends,—the reverence paid to their relics and their ashes,—as well as the multitude of sepulchral rites, alike frivolous and abominable, to which blind fanaticism has everywhere and always had recourse. Nevertheless, there is a foundation of divine truth, not less than of human affection, for the universal concern of survivors as to the disposal of their dead. It is a testimony to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

But this is not all. For, in the second place, Abraham is not merely anxious about the decent and comely interment of his beloved Sarah; he is concerned also about the place where she is to be buried, and especially about having it as his own. He is smitten suddenly and strangely with the desire of being a proprietor in the land (ver. 3, 4). How is this, at such a time? Hitherto he has been contented to be a stranger and pilgrim, not owning a foot of ground in the country which God had promised to give to himself personally, as well as to his seed, for an inheritance. Now he must have some possession in it that, by the strictest and fullest right, he can call his own. He covets, indeed, no very wide domain;—no large and productive estate. A barren rock, a hollow cave, is all he cares for; not fields whose rich harvests may fill his barns, but a solitary sepulchre to receive the dust of his dead. Still such

as it is, he must have it as his own. He insists on that with not a little pertinacity in his conference with the people of the land ; and he must be supposed to have some good reason for insisting on it.

The narrative of this remarkable conference (ver. 3-20) is singularly graphic and picturesque. Abraham appears in a peculiarly interesting light. It is pleasing to see the esteem in which he is evidently held, as well as the sympathy which his domestic misfortune awakens. And the somewhat stately and elaborate, yet graceful interchange of courtesy between him and the sons of Heth, is in the finest style of oriental manners. It is a vividly painted scene of the olden time. We see the whole negotiation going on before our eyes ; and as we listen to the formal compliments that pass between the parties,—with such studied dignity, yet withal such real cordiality and kindness,—we feel as if we actually witnessed the solemn gravity of countenance with which they mutually saluted one another,—and as if, for all that solemnity, we could yet clasp them in a genuine embrace of brotherhood.

But the spiritual meaning of the transaction, and its bearing upon Abraham's faith and hope, should interest us, as believers, even more than its simple and natural beauty.

Why does Abraham refuse the proposal of the children of Heth, that he should make use of one of their sepulchres ? (ver. 6-9.) And why does he decline the second proposal made to him by "Ephron the Hittite, the son of Zoar,"—who, finding that the patriarch has set his heart on a particular cave which he wishes to purchase, offers frankly and heartily to make it over, with the field in which it is situated, as a free gift for ever ? (ver. 10-13.) But no ! nothing will satisfy him but his being allowed to make the property his own by right of purchase. Accordingly the bargain is struck ; the money is paid ; the transference is made in due form of law, and in presence of a sufficient number of witnesses. Abraham weighs to Ephron the silver, and receives a sure right to the field (ver. 14-20).

There is something very singular in all this. It is more than a mere contest of politeness between persons unwilling to be outdone by one another in the exchange of mutual courtesies. Might not these men of Heth, and this Ephron the Hittite, have with some reason, charged Abraham with something like churlishness in thus refusing so peremptorily to let them show him any kindness? It was as if he was determined to misunderstand and distrust them; and it really argued, one would say, almost as high a tone of generous feeling on their part that they did not take Abraham's refusal amiss, as that they made to him the proposals which he so obstinately declined.

Abraham could not mean to offend these kind and friendly neighbours. Nor could he have any stilly scruple about being under obligation to an honourable man for a slight token of respect—a natural and simple office of good will.

The explanation of his conduct must be found in the light in which he regarded the land in which he was a sojourner. For let it be remembered, as I have already explained, that the only hope connected with the future world which Abraham had, was bound up in the promise that he was himself personally to inherit that land. There is no trace, in all the patriarch's history, of any other promise whatever, relating to the life to come. What Abraham was taught to expect was the inheritance of the very soil on which he trod, all the long years of pilgrimage. It was to be his at last; his personally.

Does not this hope give a peculiar and very precious meaning to Abraham's determination that Sarah shall not be buried in a strange, or in a hired, or even in a lent or gifted tomb, but in a sepulchre most strictly and absolutely his own? He is taking infestment in his inheritance. It belongs not to him living; but it belongs to him, and to his, when dead. Living, he can but use it as the strange country of his pilgrimage; but dying in the sure prospect of rising again, he claims a proprietor's right in it; and his kindred dust is entitled to repose in it as a home.

True,—the patriarch may almost be imagined to say to the friendly children of Heth,—True it is, that while I and my household pitch our tents among you, we are for the present, as it were, your guests ; we are in the position of casual visitors, accidental sojourners. You are the proprietors of the country. You are our hosts, and we thankfully accept of your hospitality in all that relates to our present residence within your borders. But death makes a mighty difference. Living, I dispute not with you the possession of the land. But dying, I claim it as my own ; and this lifeless body of my spouse has a better right to it ultimately and in the long run, than you or any others can ever have so long as time endures. True, it is a right that will not be asserted until time gives place to eternity. Not till then will she, and I, and all our faithful seed, stand on our feet again to receive our final inheritance of glory. But nevertheless, the right to it belongs by divine covenant to that clay-cold corpse ; and so far as regards its needful accommodation till that day comes,—it shall have a place really its own to rest in.

Such might be Abraham's feelings, though not, of course, expressed in words, in reference to the proposals which his kind and courteous neighbours made to him. And such, probably, were the views with which, sad and sorrowing, yet not despairing, he consigned his beloved one to the tomb.

I would not dogmatise upon a subject so very obscure as that of the future habitation of the blessed ; the final abode of the risen saints of God. That their inheritance is to be material as well as spiritual, is expressly revealed ; and indeed follows almost as a necessary consequence from the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Nor are there wanting indications that seem to point to this very material creation that is now their temporary dwelling-place, becoming in the end their everlasting home. Be that, however, as it may, this instance of Abraham's faith and hope, in connection with Sarah's burial, may be profitable to all believers.

It is a strong faith that he exercises ; it is an animating hope that he cherishes. In laying Sarah where she is to lie till the last trumpet sounds, Abraham anticipates the raising of her buried frame, in glorious beauty, once more to share his love. And for himself and for her he claims investiture in the promised inheritance of the “better country—even the heavenly,”—which they both alike earnestly longed for.

And is not this the very exercise of faith and hope, to which I am called when I bury a dear friend in the Lord ? I sorrow not as those who have no hope. True, my departed brother has now no portion in all that is under the sun ; nothing of all this fair and goodly earth can he claim as his own, save only the narrow cell that I have purchased for his sepulchre. But what living man really possesses such an inheritance as his lifeless clay may claim ? What ruler over a hundred kingdoms—what owner of thousands of acres—has an estate or property like that which belongs to his mouldering dust ? These proprietors are but tenants for a day ; at any moment they may receive notice to quit. But the dead body of a saint of God, destined to rise again, has an indefeasible right to an everlasting inheritance.

Ah ! it is the dead—the dead in Christ—who are the only legitimate possessors of this whole creation of God. To the redeemed dead belongs the entire property of the redeemed world. The rich man, clothed in purple and faring sumptuously every day, must be content with six feet of soil at last ; and even that is not his own ; the earth is to cast him out. But Lazarus, as angels carry his soul to Abraham’s bosom—the beggar Lazarus, with his sores that the dogs were wont to lick—tossed carelessly into a reeking charnel-pit, where all vile things are contemptuously cast aside,—takes quiet possession bodily, by anticipation and in part, of what ultimately and in full is to belong to him for ever.

XXXI.

A MARRIAGE CONTRACTED IN THE LORD.

GENESIS XXIV.

Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.—PROVERBS xviii. 22.

House and riches are the inheritance of fathers ; and a prudent wife is from the Lord.—PROVERBS xix. 4.

THE incidents recorded in this chapter are in themselves, viewed simply in the light of a story of human life, full of interest. The scene is one of homely and primitive simplicity ; its romance fills the imagination ; its pathetic beauty affects the heart. As a picture of manners, it has the blended charm of classical and oriental grace ; as a domestic tale, it carries our best and purest sympathies along with it.

The solicitude of the venerable father, and the affecting solemnity of his charge to a long tried and trusted servant—the oath so sacredly imposed, and with such scrupulous conscientiousness accepted—the departure of the messenger on his singular errand—his honest devotedness to his master—his unbounded reliance on his master's God and his own—these preliminaries of this transaction are conceived and described in the simplest and most touching style of pious faith (ver. 1-9). Nor does the interest of the narrative diminish as we follow the old man—or rather go along with him—in his strange embassy. All throughout, this chosen servant of the chosen friend of God manifests his unbounded reliance on the divine goodness and grace ; and we delight to connect his

tenderness of conscience in undertaking the mission beside Abraham's bed at first, with his committal of himself and it to the special providence of God, in that prayer at the well, so bold and at the same time so humble, in which he almost ventures to prescribe how his errand is to be accomplished—leaving the matter, however, unreservedly in his hands whose wisdom is as unerring as it is unsearchable. Thereafter, in quick succession, we mark, as if we saw them, the meeting at the well—the courtesy of the opening interview—the frank exchange of kindly greetings and good offices—the admirable delicacy of the servant's introduction of himself to the daughter of his master's kinsman—and his pious acknowledgment of the hand of the Lord in ordering the whole affair. Then passing on, we enter the brother's house. And we are touched by the servant's impatience to discharge his trust, and his simple recital of what the Lord had done for him, as affording, without argument or remark, or any pleading at all of his own, sufficient warrant of his suit. The promptness with which all is arranged, and the consent of all parties obtained—with no questioning or debate, but with a single eye to the manifest leadings of the divine providence, and a believing acquiescence in the divine will—this also forms a striking feature in the scene, and prepares us for the hasty departure of the maiden, with her faithful nurse as her single attendant. She willingly leaves her father's house—recognising the call of the same Lord who had called Abraham, and casting herself on him alone, with a noble confidence, worthy of one who is to be Abraham's daughter. Last of all, we trace the homeward journey—the approach of Isaac in his meditative evening walk—the vail modestly taken for a covering by his betrothed—the servant's recital to Isaac of all that he had done—and the cordiality with which Isaac welcomes the wife so evidently sent by God, and receives her into the tent of his lamented mother—"loving" her, as the history with touching simplicity concludes, and "being comforted."

All these circumstances combine to make this portion of the sacred record peculiarly attractive. In reading it, we feel at home amid these patriarchal incidents and descriptions, realising them as if they were familiar. The stately pomp and ceremony—the reserve and coldness and suspicion of a more artificial social state—pass away. The freshness of nature's early truth and tenderness returns—artless, guileless, fearless. We breathe a purer and freer air. We are touched with a deeper sense, at once of a special providence in heaven, and of a real and true sympathy on earth. We feel that there can be such a thing as the exercise of a frank and generous trust, relying both upon God and upon man ; and that it is possible to act upon the belief, both of God's superintendence, and of man's sincerity.

A narrative like this is marred rather than illustrated by minute exposition. A few leading points may be selected as indicating its moral and spiritual bearings. Faith, and the prayer of faith, are here signally honoured.

I. Abraham in this matter is evidently guided by a higher wisdom than his own ; although he is left apparently to consult and act for himself. There is no direct and immediate revelation of the divine will given for his guidance, as in many former instances of his difficult pilgrimage ; he must exercise his own judgment. He is not, however, on that account, abandoned by God. He has signs enough to direct him ; and using his best endeavour to discover and ascertain what the Lord would have him to do, he may, without anxiety, commit to him all his way.

He finds himself in circumstances which call for some step being taken. The mourning for Sarah is over ; but sadness and desolation still reign in the patriarch's household. Her tent is still empty, and the grief of Isaac is still unsoothed. He is reminded also of his own approaching dissolution ; his course on earth is drawing to a close ; he is "old and well stricken in age ;" but his cup is full,—“the Lord has blessed

him in all things" (ver. 1). There is only one care remaining—one duty to be discharged, ere he depart in peace. Isaac's union with a suitable partner must if possible be secured; "an help meet for him," as the son and successor of the patriarch, must be found.

It is a subject that may well perplex him. For it is not merely a private matter of personal and family arrangement, involving Isaac's individual happiness and the honour of his father's house. It is a public concern, intimately affecting the covenant of which Abraham is the earthly head, and the countless millions who are to be blessed in his seed. Isaac sustains a peculiar, an almost sacred character. It is his to inherit and transmit, not worldly possessions merely, but the hope and promise of salvation. Hence his marriage has an importance reaching far beyond himself; and, in arranging it, there is a difficulty or dilemma.

For the conditions of the problem might seem to be irreconcilable. On the one hand, Isaac must contract no alliance with the daughters of the land; and, on the other hand, he must not leave the land to seek a bride elsewhere. The former condition is essential to the preservation of the holy seed pure and uncontaminated by any intermixture with strange and idolatrous nations. The latter is indispensable to his sharing with his faithful father, not only the future inheritance, but the present pilgrimage as well. For Isaac is to share his father's trial as well as his reward; he is to walk by faith in an inheritance to come;—living and dying in the land destined to be his, but without a portion in it that he can call his own,—except his grave. Hence he must continue among the people from whom he is not at liberty to select a wife; he may not go in search of one to the ancient seat of his race. Here is a perplexity and a hard question;—what is to be done?

Abraham had, indeed, received intelligence from his early home, which he might well regard as a seasonable hint from

God ; and had he been younger, he might himself have managed the affair. Now, he must leave it in other hands. But happily he has one in his household whom he can fully trust, an old and confidential servant ;—the steward, as we may probably conjecture, who has been already noticed in this history,—Eliezer of Damascus (ver. 2-4). He, too, however, when the commission is first proposed to him, sees the difficulty. He is not to marry his master's son to any daughter of the Canaanites ; neither will he be allowed to take Isaac back to the land from whence Abraham came. And yet he may be unable to persuade any woman of the country and kindred to which Abraham limits him,—any daughter of Terah's family, —to leave her home ; to commit herself to the care of a stranger, and share the fortunes of an unknown husband. In these circumstances, he will not bind himself by an absolute and unconditional oath (ver. 5) ; nor is it until he is not only encouraged by Abraham's strong expression of his faith in the guidance of Jehovah, or the Angel of Jehovah,—but relieved also by the arrangement that, in the contingency he apprehended, he is to be free from his vow,—that he consents to undertake, under so solemn a sanction, so responsible a mission (ver. 5-8).*

* The manner of the oath is singular, having respect probably to the covenant of which Abraham had received the sign and seal ;—the covenant ratified by the rite of circumcision, “And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and sware to him concerning that matter” (ver. 9). Both Abraham and his servant regard the transaction in which they are now engaged as essentially connected with the covenant of which Isaac, or rather Isaac's seed, was to be the heir ; and hence, by an appeal to the covenant, and to its seal, they hallow it. Or it may be that the party thus taking the oath swears by him who is to spring out of Abraham's loins,—the promised Saviour of the world ;—if indeed the ceremony be not rather, as some think, a mere token of leal and loyal subjection, without any such peculiar spiritual significancy. At all events, this is manifestly a transaction of great and solemn import : and the pledge is to be regarded as one of no ordinary force.

II. Such being the spirit in which this commission is given by the aged patriarch, and undertaken by his confidential servant,—the execution of it is in entire harmony with its commencement.

The preparation for the journey being simply made, and the journey itself being well and happily accomplished (ver. 10), Abraham's ambassador and plenipotentiary sets himself to consider how the extraordinary treaty of marriage he has on hand may be most hopefully opened ; and after a somewhat strange manner does he proceed to open it. He follows a course in which we may discern, perhaps, some traces of shrewd practical wisdom, as well as still more certain evidence of simple reliance on the providence of God—a course, as it turns out, proved to be as prudent as it is primitive and pious. The well beside which he has halted—now that he knows himself to be near the country of his destination—may afford a test of character as well as an occasion of prayer.

For the token which he asks of God is not wholly arbitrary (ver. 11-13) ; there is more in his appeal than the mere demand of a sign. It is not a parallel case to that of Gideon with his fleece (Judges vi. 37) ; still less is it like the haphazard venture of the Philistines, as to the disposal of the Ark of God (1 Sam. vi. 9). It resembles rather the arrangement Jonathan made with his solitary attendant, in his assault on the garrison of the Philistines :—" If they say thus unto us, Tarry until we come unto you ; then we will stand still in our place, and will not go up unto them. But if they say thus, Come up unto us ; then we will go up : for the Lord hath delivered them into our hand ; and this shall be a sign unto us" (1 Sam. xiv. 9, 10). For in both instances we may trace a reason for the token fixed upon. That which Jonathan proposed to his armour-bearer was fitted to indicate the actual state of the army to be assailed ;—whether so alert as to repel invasion, or so secure and careless as to encourage it. And the wise old ruler of Abraham's house, with admirable sagacity,

adopted a measure calculated to prove the kindly nature of the woman whom he sought, as well as to secure the guidance of that God in the faith of whose providence he sought her.

But, after all, it is to be observed that Abraham's servant, in this entreaty for a sign, is by no means either peremptory or presumptuous. He does not arbitrarily stipulate for a miracle ; he does not even suspend his own procedure on a previous assurance being given of the interposition which he desires. He forms a plan of conduct,—the most expedient and most likely to be successful that could well be devised. He spreads it out before God ; and humbly seeks divine countenance and co-operation.

III. It is a striking and singular scene that now presents itself. Wearied with his journey, a stranger stands by the well ; and his camels at a little distance kneel down exhausted. There is nothing in his own appearance, or in his retinue, to distinguish him from an ordinary traveller. A solitary woman draws near (ver. 15-16). Suddenly she hears the wayfarer, —whom probably she has scarcely, if at all, observed before,—addressing to her a simple petition :—" Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher" (ver. 17).

Ah ! little thinks that fair young damsel of the issues that depend upon her reply ! How is it, she might have answered, that thou, being a foreigner,—and for anything I know, a foe,—askest drink of me, a native of this country,—a daughter much honoured in my father's home,—a lady entitled to be waited upon by my father's menials ? What am I, that I should minister to thee ? Or what art thou to me, that thou shouldest expect this favour at my hands ?

It was good for Rebekah that she did not answer thus. No other opportunity would probably have been given to her ; no second appeal would have been made to her ; no farther parley or pleading would have ensued.

Yes ! And it was good for another woman, who, long after, met another stranger, " wearied with his journey," at another

well,—that when she met his request, “Give me to drink,” with the churlish question, “How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria?” she had a different person from Abraham’s servant to deal with. A rude reception of that sort might have ended at once and for ever the negotiation for a marriage-treaty which this messenger from Canaan was about to open. But that other messenger from the heavenly Canaan is not so easily repelled! “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isa. lv. 8).

The maiden, in the present instance, manifests that very bountifulness of spirit which the woman of Samaria not only wanted, but thought it strange that she should be expected to possess. Without suspicion or inquiry, without upbraiding, she is impatient to respond to the stranger’s call and minister to his wants. “She hasted,” it is said;—and said, not once, but twice,—as if to indicate emphatically her ready mind, “She said, Drink, my lord: and she hasted and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink. And when she had done giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking. And she hasted, and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and ran again unto the well to draw water, and drew for all his camels” (ver. 18-20).

No wonder the good man marvelled! Such alacrity of attention to a poor wayworn traveller did indeed betoken a gracious disposition. And the circumstance fitted in so aptly to his previous train of holy meditation, that he could not fail to recognise in it an answer to his prayer. Accordingly, “the man, wondering at her, held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not” (ver. 21). Encouraged, however, by so plain a sign—using also his privilege of age, and accepting frankly the damsel’s frank cordiality of welcome,—the servant of Abraham presents the gifts which the usages of the times warranted (ver. 22). Availing himself, moreover, of the introduction so graciously arranged and ordered by his

master's God, he asks and obtains the customary rites of hospitality (ver. 23). And finally, overcome with the emotions which the Lord's marvellous guidance of him awakened, the old man unreservedly pours out his soul in the utterance of grateful praise :—"Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth ! I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren !" (ver. 26, 27).

Such a sight is fitted to move deeply the soul of the guileless maiden. The venerable aspect of the stranger, surprised into a sudden act of most profound devotion, could not but strike her heart : and the mention of the name of Abraham, of whom doubtless she had often heard in her father's house—and with whose migration, narrated as a household tale, she had been taught to associate something of the mysterious and the supernatural,—could not fail to call forth in her breast feelings of wonder, expectancy, and awe.

Who is this to whom she has been rendering what appears to be received as so remarkable a service ! It is but a little cold water that she has been giving ; a boon that she would not withhold from the poorest pilgrim she might chance to meet with at any well. But what a burst of pious gratitude does it cause ! And what a discovery does it occasion ! The old man who is the object of her apparently trifling courtesy and kindness, as if bent under the weight of an insupportable obligation, "bows down his head and worships God." And the words he utters in his ecstasy of thankfulness, bring home to her as a present reality all that from her childhood she has doubtless been wont to hear, of what was probably the most remarkable event in the family history,—the strange adventure of the ancestral patriarch called so mysteriously away long ago into a distant and a sort of dreamy land. Well may she be in haste to communicate the surprising intelligence she has so unexpectedly obtained. And well may her brother Laban, scarcely pausing to hear her rapid account of the

strange interview, hasten forth to welcome the man who has thus wonderfully introduced himself:—"Come in, thou blessed of the Lord" (ver. 28-32).

IV. The preliminaries of this affair having passed off so auspiciously, the negotiation proceeds happily to its issue. The faithful servant, true to his master's interest and his own oath, refuses even to take the refreshment that he needs until he has delivered his message and received his answer. He acts upon the principle laid down by our Lord for the guidance of his ambassadors (Luke x. 8-11). For Abraham's ambassador, also, has in a sense the gospel to preach; he has to speak of the kingdom of God being brought nigh to this house. He comes from a family in which the fear and worship of the Lord are to be found; nay more: he comes from the family which alone has had an authentic revelation of the covenant, and which alone has received its seal. And he comes to offer to Laban's household a share in the privilege of Abraham's calling, as well as in the blessing of Abraham's God. Will they believe the good news he has to deliver? Will they so believe as to be willing to let their young sister go upon the venture of what they now hear? To this point the faithful messenger must first address himself. To press for a decision upon this point is his first and chief concern, to which even the supply of his necessary food is altogether subordinate. He is in earnest,—as the great Messenger was in earnest, when he too had to deal with the woman whom he met at the well about her spiritual good,—her separation from old connections that she might be the Lord's handmaid,—and found the task so engrossing as to make him forget his own most pressing wants (John iv. 31-34). So Abraham's servant felt in reference to the commission with which he was charged. It was his meat also, as it was the Lord's, to get his commission well executed in obedience to his master and his master's God; and the execution of it took precedence with him even of his necessary food.

And how simply does he go about the execution of it! He does little more than narrate the Lord's dealings with Abraham in Canaan, and with himself on his journey thence. As a matter of course, we may be sure that he dwells somewhat more at length on the details of his master's pilgrimage than the brief summary given of his discourse might indicate (ver. 34-36): nor can we doubt that he opens up, at least in part, the fulness of the blessing with which "the Lord had blessed his master greatly," as having in it a rich store of spiritual as well as temporal benefits. At all events, it is the Lord's blessing upon Abraham and his seed that this devout and upright man holds out as the chief, and indeed the only, recommendation of the suit he has to urge. For, in what remains of his address (ver. 37-48), beyond a plain recital of the things that had befallen him, with a pious reference throughout to the manifest grace and goodness of the Lord in the leadings of his holy providence,—the good man uses no arguments whatever to enforce the proposal he has to make to Laban's household. If his mission is to be successful, their "faith is not to stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." For himself, he simply awaits such result as the Lord may be pleased to appoint (ver. 49).

The effect of his appeal is not merely an instance of the confiding hospitality of these times, but a proof that the same divine interposition in which this whole procedure originated was continued down to its close. The brother and father; the latter in all probability being now, in his old age, represented to a large extent by his son; the relatives, in short, of the woman thus strangely courted as the bride of a Prince Royal, whose person and whose kingly heritage are alike unknown,—cannot withstand the evidence of a divine warrant which the whole transaction bears. They frankly own their conviction. It is the Lord, what can we say or do? (ver. 50, 51). Again, the old man is overpowered in spirit by the marvellous goodness of God: "When he heard their words, he worshipped the Lord, bowing himself to the earth" (ver. 52).

Then follows on the part of the overjoyed messenger, a display of the rich presents which he had been authorised to distribute, if his message was crowned with success. He had already, on the first opening of his conversation with Rebekah, used the oriental liberty of enforcing his address by adding a slight but substantial token of respect; "a golden ear-ring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold" (ver. 22). Now that his overtures have been so well received, he has no occasion for reserve, but may freely disclose all his ample stores, and endow the destined bride of his master's son with the whole princely presents that he has had in keeping. Accordingly, he "brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah: he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things" (ver. 53).

V. Thus, as to all that is essential to it, the treaty of marriage is fully ratified, according to the usages of eastern hospitality; and in a sense, too, with the munificence of princely state. It is now merely a question of time and circumstance;—as to when and how the treaty is to be carried out to its consummation.

Very natural is the remonstrance which the brother and the mother of the bride addressed to the impatient servant of Abraham (ver. 54, 55). Whether it be a delay of ten days, or as some say, of ten months, or even years, that the mother joins with her son in soliciting, before her daughter bids her a last adieu,—it is a touch of genuine tenderness such as we would not willingly lose in this narrative. Nor in such circumstances is it a trifling evidence of the chosen virgin's faith, that she is herself enabled to withstand this pleading (ver. 57, 58). She has taken the decisive step when she has resolved to peril her all upon the truth of the singular embassy that has come to her. And now, when it is left to her to say how soon the step shall become irrevocable, her reply is prompt. She balances the fond reluctance of her

family to part with her—a reluctance which, however grateful to her feelings, has no force at all as an argument addressed to her faith—against the clear appeal which the holy man who has called her makes ; “Hinder me not, seeing the Lord hath prospered my way ; send me away that I may go to my master” (ver. 56). And she cannot hesitate for a moment. Having made up her mind to a painful sacrifice and serious risk, she feels that “now is the accepted time ; now is the day of salvation.” What is to be done, had best be done quickly ;—no halting between two opinions ;—no hesitancy ;—no yielding to the temptation that would gain time and prompt dangerous postponement and procrastination. Having put her hand to the plough, she will not draw back. She hears a voice powerfully speaking to her, and saying, “Go forward”——

—And she is gone ; gone for ever from her father’s dwelling, and from the love and sympathy of her mother and her brother !

With an ample benediction do her friends dismiss her (ver. 59, 60) ; and with entire resignation and hearty goodwill, in simple faith—really not knowing whither she goes—she turns her back on the home of her childhood and the land of her birth (ver. 61). Truly it is a wife worthy of Abraham’s son that the good providence of Abraham’s God has selected. It is a faith not unlike that of Abraham himself which animates and sustains the appointed wife of Isaac, the destined mother of the promised seed.

VI. And now, the strange embassy is well ended. The journey back to Canaan is without adventure or interruption. The caravan, with its attendant camels and bands of servants, is drawing near to the place where Abraham’s tents are pitched. What tumultuous thoughts are filling the bosom of the young stranger ! Her venerable friend is not unmoved himself. The first glimpse of his master’s encampment, in the distance afar off, stirs his soul to its warmest depths. He

has right joyous news to impart to the aged pilgrim ; he has a gracious daughter to present to him. And that daughter—may she not well be agitated as she approaches the unknown scene of the great crisis of her life, in profoundest darkness as to what the colour of that life is to be ?

It is a calm summer evening. The oxen have been lodged in their stalls, and the implements of husbandry are at rest in the furrows of the field. Not a breath of wind rustles in the noiseless leaves. Not a stray sheep wanders in the dark shadow of the hills. It is a time of profound repose. One solitary figure is seen slowly pacing the sweet-scented meadow path. Unconscious of nature's charms, although his soul is melted into sweet harmony with the peace that reigns all around,—he is rapt in holy fellowship with the God of his salvation. Suddenly, as it happens, he lifts his eyes ; and what a sight meets his view !

Can he fail to guess what cavalcade it is that is crossing the plain towards his father's tents ? Are his meditations rudely interrupted ?

Nay rather, his prayer is now graciously answered. The aged servant of the household is evidently not returning alone. He has not been unsuccessful in his suit. Again Isaac is to have an illustrious instance of the truth of that blessed word : —“ Jehovah-jireh—The Lord will provide.”

What a meeting on that serene summer night ! It is faith meeting faith ;—faith venturous and bold, meeting faith meditative and meek ! On the one hand, there is the faith that not all the perils of a long journey and an unknown issue can daunt ; on the other hand, there is the faith that seeks quiet rest in communing with the God of nature, as the God also of covenanted grace. Rebekah, dropping thy modest veil, as if half-afraid or half-ashamed, of thine adventurous spirit,—and thou, Isaac, lifting thine eyes, as if awakened out of a trance,—ye two are now one in the Lord ! Your different characters,—already perhaps slightly indicated in the

different actings of your common faith,—may cause, alas ! some dispeace and sin in your future course, when they come to be more fully unfolded and brought into collision with one another, amid the cares and trials of your common pilgrimage. But in the main, ye are congenial souls. And the marriage thus arranged by divine wisdom and grace and love, has its fair share of the happiness which that blessed estate is fitted to yield to those who “marry in the Lord.”

At all events, the commencement of this matrimonial alliance is auspiciously announced, when the narrative, connecting the declining shadow of the past with the opening dawn of the future, intimates with all simplicity that “Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife ; and he loved her : and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death ” (ver. 67).

XXXII.

THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM.

GENESIS XXV. 1-10.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.—

PSALM CXVI. 15.

THE eventful career of Abraham is drawing to a close. The purposes being now fulfilled for which God raised him up,—and another being ready to take his place,—he passes from this stirring scene, and is permitted to depart in peace. The circumstances connected with his departure are very briefly noticed ; but they are suggestive of some profitable thoughts.

I. Of the last few years of his life little is recorded, excepting only that, after Sarah's death, he contracted a second marriage, and had, as the issue of it, a new and considerable family (ver. 1-4).

It does not appear that in Abraham's second marriage there was anything discreditable or sinful.* Living as he did

* It is a groundless notion which some rash expositors have invented, that this Keturah was none other than Hagar. Abraham, it is imagined, took Hagar back to his home, after her temporary flight from Sarah, and had by her the children here named ;—and that, too, before the birth of Isaac. Any necessity for such a theory as this that might be supposed to arise out of Abraham's age, and the improbability of his having a family after Sarah's death, is met by the consideration already suggested in connection with the birth of Isaac. Nor is there a single other argument of the least force upon this point. For we cannot have any sympathy with the delicacy of those morbid ecclesiastics who, condemning in every case a

for years after the loss of Sarah,—and seeing his sons Ishmael and Isaac settled in households of their own,—it was not unnatural, nor in the circumstances unjustifiable, that he should seek another partner. That the promise might be fulfilled literally as well as spiritually, he became the “father of many nations” after the flesh;—even as in Isaac, and his seed through Isaac,—the seed which is, “not many, but one, that is Christ,”—he was destined to be the “father of many nations,” spiritually and by faith. Nor is it unimportant to observe, in the near prospect of Abraham’s decease, how pointedly the sacred history adverts to the timely settlement which he made of his earthly affairs before his end came (ver. 5, 6). The particulars of the settlement are not indeed detailed. But while the divine decree constituted Isaac his principal heir, the other parties having claims upon him were by no means overlooked. The patriarch was careful, not only to make suitable provision for them during his lifetime, but also to leave such instructions as might prevent disputes after he was gone.

Thus Abraham passed the latter stage of his troubled journey,—in privacy, apparently, and in peace,—waiting till his change came.

II. In peace also he departed, his eyes having seen the salvation of God (ver. 7-8). The pilgrim’s journey is over; the wanderer has found repose; the stranger has reached his second marriage as unholy, would acquit the patriarch of that factitious sin, by charging him with the real guilt, either of systematic polygamy, or of continued and deliberate adultery. Certainly Keturah was not Hagar. The sacred history is not here resuming a dropped thread, and introducing out of its place what should have been mentioned before, as these interpreters allege. They would read the first verse of the chapter thus:—“Abraham had taken a wife”—and so forth. But the history is not thus retrospective in this instance. It is evidently carrying on the narrative in its simple and natural order, and mentioning what occurred after Sarah was dead. It was after her death that Abraham lawfully entered into a second matrimonial alliance.

home. There is no more trial of faith,—no anxious feeling with the hand if by any means it may grasp “the substance of things hoped for,”—no straining of the eye to catch “the evidence of things not seen.” The difficulty of laying hold of the intangible and realising the invisible is now for ever at an end. The eternal economy is at last unveiled. Shadows and phantoms are gone ; and this material world, as well as the bodily frame which connected him with it, are for a season left behind. So Abraham, as to his soul or spirit, “gave up the ghost and died,”—departing to be with the Lord. And as to his body or flesh, he went the way of all living, to the “long home” to which “man goeth,” while “the mourners go about the streets” (Eccles. xii. 6). The patriarch was “gathered to his people,” until that day when the dust shall live again at the sound of the last trumpet, and all the buried dead,—Abraham and his people to whom he is gathered,—shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and shall come forth.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Ps. cxvi. 15). It was so in the case of Abraham. His death was matter of concern to the God in whom he believed. The Lord specially looked to it, and made it on one special occasion the subject of a special promise. His death, as he is then assured, is to be full of calmness and contentment. He is to die, indeed, as his fathers have died, and to be buried. But he is to “die in peace, and be buried in a good old age.” For even his death and burial are cared for by his covenant-God ; and all the circumstances are ordered by him, so that the patriarch, departing, enters into rest.

III. The departure of Abraham, thus calm and peaceful in itself, was not premature or untimely in its date. He did not die too soon. He died “in a good old age”—“an old man, and full of years.” “He was satisfied with length of days, for his eyes had seen the salvation of God” (Ps. xci. 16). He had experienced enough of the Lord’s loving-kindness in the land of the living.

For it is not by the ordinary measures of the successive seasons as they roll on, that this fulness of years is, in a spiritual point of view, to be estimated ;—nor even by those public or domestic events which men often set up as landmarks beside the stream of time or the beaten path of life ;—but by what the faithful and patient pilgrim has seen of the salvation of God, and what he has tasted of the divine goodness during his sojourn on the earth.

Is he full ? Is the pilgrim satisfied ? Is he ready to depart ? It is not because he can reckon some threescore and ten revolutions of the sun ; or it may be fourscore ; or even like Abraham, “ an hundred, threescore, and fifteen ” (ver. 7). Nor is it because he can say of the various sources of interest and pleasure upon earth,—I have drunk of them all. But it is because he has eaten the bread of heaven and drawn water out of the wells of salvation ; because he has been filled with the fulness of God ; because he has been partaker of the unsearchable riches of Christ. He has lived long in the earth—his days have been many in the land ;—not in proportion to the anniversaries of his birth that he has celebrated ; or to the varied casualties of infancy, childhood, manhood, and old age, that he has experienced ; or to the changes all around him, that make him feel as if it were a new world in which he is now dwelling. No ! It is by the tokens of the divine love that he has received, the gracious dealings of God with his soul that he has noted, and the wonders of grace and mercy that he has witnessed in the church of the redeemed, that the believer reckons himself to have lived long on the earth !

Has he but this very moment acquainted himself with God, and found peace ? Has he only now for the first time tasted and seen that the Lord is gracious ? Then already, let him be ever so young in the estimate of time, he is old enough, by the measure of eternity, to depart in peace to his

heavenly home. "He is satisfied with length of days, for his eyes have seen the salvation of God."

Is he, on the other hand, doomed to a long sojourn on the earth? Is he spared to grow grey in the service of his Lord? Is he worn and wasted with the burden and heat of a lengthened pilgrimage? Has he length of days reaching to the extreme limit of life, and surviving all contemporary sympathies and friendships? And is he left alone among strangers, like a stranded vessel when the tide has ebbed? Even with such length of days he is satisfied, for "his eyes have seen"—and continue still to the last to see—"the salvation of God." "To him to live is Christ" (Phil. i. 21). And when at last the hour of his departure comes, it is not as if he were laying down the burden of years of vanity, but as thankfully owning a well-furnished table and a full cup, that he utters the language of faith and hope:—"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (Ps. xxiii. 16).

XXXIII.

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF ABRAHAM.

GENESIS xxv.

So then they which be of faith are blessed with—FAITHFUL ABRAHAM.—
GALATIANS iii. 9.

THE notice of the death of a distinguished man is usually regarded as incomplete without at least an attempt to sum up his history and delineate his character. In the instance of Abraham, this is no easy task.

The recorded life of the patriarch might almost seem to be left to the church as an exercise and trial of the very faith upon which he himself was called to act. In every view he is a test, as well as an example, of believing loyalty to God;—both in what he did and dared, and in what he sacrificed and suffered, during his eventful career. The outward aspect of his course is exhibited in a few of its most striking particulars; but we have scarcely any key to its inward interpretation. We have little or no insight into his private and personal experience. He is presented to us as a public character; and the incidents of his pilgrimage are narrated with an obvious reference rather to the general information of the church than to the prolonged remembrance of the individual. The notes and explanations are rare. No private diary remains to open up the secret springs of thought and action; nor has any intimate friend withdrawn the curtain of confidential intercourse, and unfolded to us the mysteries of the closet, the study, and the unbent hour of familiarity. There is no access

behind the scenes ; no unfolding of those hidden movements of soul which have their external types, and nothing more, in the vicissitudes of a strangely-chequered history. One advantage, however, we have ;—and it is a great and most important one. It is the authoritative announcement of the general principle or category under which the whole is to be classed. Abraham lived and walked by faith ; and therefore what is required in a brief recapitulation of the leading events of his life is simply to trace the working of that believing reliance upon God which furnishes the solution and explanation of them all.

Consider then, this “FAITHFUL ABRAHAM” in the successive eras of his history, as these may be grouped under two comprehensive heads ;—the one reaching from his first call to the remarkable crisis of his full and formal justification (chap. xi. 27—xv. 21) ; and the other, from his unsteadfastness in the matter of Hagar to the final trial and triumph of his faith in the sacrifice first, and then in the marriage, of his son Isaac (chap. xvi. 1—xxiv. 67). During the first of these periods, his faith is chiefly exercised upon the bare promise itself made to him by God. During the second, it has to do mainly with the manner in which the promise is to be fulfilled.

PART FIRST.—(CHAP. XI. 27 ; XV. 21).

In this first period, we have a deeply interesting and almost dramatic series of events,—beginning with a very commonplace transaction, but ending in what elevates the patriarch to a high rank in the sight both of God and of man.

I. Abraham comes before us as an emigrant, but an emigrant in very peculiar circumstances ;—an emigrant, not of his own accord, but at the call of God (chap. xi. 31—xii. 5). The first stage of the migration, from Ur to Haran, is accomplished without a breach in the family ; but at Haran the oldest member of the company is cut off ; Abraham there loses his venerable father. He does not, however, shrink from this

trial and its accompanying increase of responsibility. He might have taken it amiss, and counted it a bad omen, that the very beginning of his pilgrimage should be marked with so sad a stroke. His father might surely have been spared to witness his triumphal entry into the new territory which he was to possess for an inheritance ; or at least he might have been allowed to depart in peace in the old country where his lot had been so long cast. Why should Abraham's movement be so ordered that his father's bones must rest,—neither in the place from which he goes, nor in the place which God has promised to him,—but as it were by the wayside ? Surely it is not for nothing that he is appointed to set up as his first milestone a parent's tomb. It is an emphatic initiation into his calling, as destined henceforth to be a stranger on the earth.

II. As a stranger, accordingly, we find him entering Canaan, and beginning his migratory sojourn in that country (chap. xii. 6 ; xiii. 4). It is not, in his case, an ordinary removal from one settled habitation to another ; the emigrant arrives at the place of his destination, and finds it a place of wandering. Nor is this a result ascertained by experience ; he is warned beforehand that he is to have but a wayfarer's passing use of the land, although ultimately, in connection with it, a rich inheritance awaits him. In such circumstances, the incidental failure as well as the habitual firmness of his holy trust in God is to be made manifest. Wherever he went, Abraham "built an altar unto the Lord," and "called upon the name of the Lord" (chap. xii. 7, 8 ; xiii. 4). Everywhere and always he openly observed the worship of the true God, to whatever misunderstanding or persecution it might expose him. One only blot disfigures the picture. The transaction in Egypt is the first sad instance of that infirmity which led him on rare occasions to walk by sense rather than by faith ; and to consult for himself, instead of leaving all to him in whom he believed. It is easy to condemn these instances of

weakness ; although if we place ourselves in Abraham's position,—with a just estimate of that fearful dissolution of manners which alone could suggest or account for the expedient he adopted,—we shall be far more ready to sympathise with his embarrassment than to censure his unsteadfastness. And our very sympathy will all the more dispose us to profit by the example of his otherwise unshaken faith.

III. The shifting scene next presents to us the patriarch in an aspect of bright moral beauty (chap. xiii. 5-18) ;—for never, perhaps, does Abraham appear in a more attractive light than in his courteous and kindly dealing with his kinsman Lot. The wisdom of his attempt to allay domestic strife by the proposal of an amicable separation, is cleared from every suspicion of a sinister or selfish policy by the admirable disinterestedness with which he leaves the choice of the whole land to Lot, and the cheerfulness with which he acquiesces in Lot's preference of the better portion. And we may well trace these noble qualities to no ordinary motive of mere human virtue, but to that divine grace which alone enabled Abraham, as a stranger and pilgrim on the earth, to sit loose to the attractions of earthly possessions and earthly privileges, and to have his treasure and his heart alike in heaven. For it is a great instance of heavenly-mindedness that is here exhibited ; and as such, it is owned and blessed by God at the time, while all the subsequent history attests the divine approval of it. By the example of his gracious dealing with Abraham, the Lord ratifies the assurance which his believing people in all ages may have, that they shall fare none the worse, either in this world or in the next, for any sacrifices they may make, or any sufferings they may endure, in the interest of holiness and peace and love—since “godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come” (1 Tim. iv. 8).

IV. The plot of that moral drama, if we may so call it, which opens with Abraham's offer and Lot's choice, very

speedily develops itself. The war of the kings (chap. xiv.), in its origin and issue, is a striking commentary on that transaction. The plain where Lot settles, well watered by the Jordan, sheltered by sunny hills on either side, and basking in the full smiles of a most genial clime, has become populous and rich ; but the moral does not keep pace with the material improvement of the land. The too common accompaniment of abundant prosperity is to be traced among the people ; unheard-of profligacy characterises their manners ; crime and effeminacy are in the ascendant. The usual consequences soon follow. A war of petty principalities breaks out ; and Lot suffers in the turmoil. In spite of all the past, Abraham hastens to the rescue ; thinking only of the sad calamity which has befallen his brother's son. It is an instance of no common generosity ; and it is an evidence, moreover, of the patriarch's deep spiritual insight into the promises of which he is the heir. For it was his faith which moved Abraham to assume so strangely the unwonted character of a prince entitled to levy war ; and it was his faith also which led him to give so remarkable an expression of his willing subjection to the illustrious being whom Melchisedec prefigured—and to whom, as “a priest upon his throne,” all the spiritual seed of Abraham are ever willing to give the undivided glory of all their victories.

V. The transition from the most palpable and almost obtrusive publicity to the deepest privacy—which forms the next era in Abraham's life—is also eminently fitted to bring out the spirituality of his faith (chap. xv.)

In any case to combine these two—public action for the Lord and private communion with him—is no easy exercise. But in the case of Abraham, the combination is peculiarly trying. Look at him, and mark the contrast. On the one side you see a brave general at the head of a conquering army, risking all for the recovery of a kinsman's household goods, and playing a right royal part among this world's potentates and princes. On the other hand, you seem to see a melancholy

recluse, wandering alone at midnight, a star-gazer, imagining ideal glories in some visionary world to come. The transition is most startling, from the hostile din of tumultuous strife to the serene solitude of a colloquy with God beneath the silent eloquence of the starry heavens ! But Abraham is at home in either scene. After his brief experience of worldly renown, he is found in secret and most confidential communion with his God.

It is the hour of universal slumber ; every eye is closed ; every busy foot is at rest. But near that silent tent two figures may be seen ; one like unto the Son of God—the other a venerable form, bending low in adoration of his divine companion. It is the hero who but yesterday on the field of successful battle might have reared a throne to defy all the pride of eastern empire. But he has another and a far different calling. Not the garish pomp of military triumph, but the secrecy of midnight fellowship with heaven, has charms for him. And as we listen and overhear the strange colloquy that ensues—in which, apart altogether from any corroborative sign on which he might lean, the patriarch simply believes the divine assurance that, childless and aged as he is, a progeny as numerous as the stars awaits him—we cannot but own that it is indeed a mere and simple exercise of faith alone, without works or services of any kind whatever, that is the instrument of his salvation, and the means of his finding favour with God. And we cannot but acquiesce in the divine testimony respecting his justification—so frequently repeated with reference to this single and solitary incident in his history :—“ Abraham believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness ” (chap. xv. 6 ; Rom. iv. 3, 9, 22 ; Gal. iii. 6).

But though faith alone is the hand by which Abraham on this occasion appropriates the justifying righteousness pledged to him, in the person and work of the yet unborn Saviour who is to spring from him,—it is not a faith that is content indolently to acquiesce in the darkness of entire igno-

rance respecting the ways of that God upon whose mere word it so implicitly relies. On the contrary, as the Lord follows up his assurance respecting Abraham's posterity—"so shall thy seed be," with the repetition of the promise more immediately affecting Abraham in his own person, "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it;"—so the patriarch on his part follows up his believing submission with the earnest inquiry, "Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" In reply, he has the covenant of his peace ratified by a very special sacrifice; and he obtains a gracious insight both into the future fortunes of his seed, and into the destiny awaiting himself. As to his seed, he is informed that though the delay of four centuries is to intervene, through the long-suffering of God, until "the iniquity of the Amorites is full"—they are at last to possess the whole land; while as to himself, he is to understand that his inheritance is to be postponed to the future and eternal state, and that the utmost he has to look for in this world is a quiet departure when his pilgrimage is over. Thus, justified by faith, the patriarch is made willing to subordinate all the earthly prospects of his race to the will of him in whom he has believed;—and as for himself, to live by the power of the world to come.

I look upon the midnight scene, with the remarkable covenant transaction which closes it, as the climax of what we may call the first part of Abraham's walk of faith; in which he is led onward and upward to the highest pitch of expectation, while as yet not a hint is given of the way in which his expectation is to be realised. Thus far the Lord has been training him to the exercise of implicit faith in the promises of salvation, altogether irrespective of any clear information as to the means of their fulfilment. And it is the triumph of Abraham's faith at this crisis of his history that he acquiesces with unhesitating confidence in these promises, though not the slightest ray of light is cast upon the momentous and most

difficult question, how it is possible, in his case, old and childless as he is, to have them ever made good.

PART SECOND—(CHAP. xvi. 1; xxiv. 67).

But now, in the next stage of his pilgrimage, it is upon that very point that the faith of Abraham is to be tested and proved. The trial is to turn upon the manner in which the promises previously announced are to be accomplished.

I. In this new trial, the patriarch's faith appears at first to fail. Impatient of the Lord's delay, he listens to the plausible suggestion of his partner, and suffers himself to be betrayed into that sin in the matter of Hagar, which brought ere long so much domestic dispeace in its train, and proved even at the time so sad a root of bitterness to his soul; marring the pure joy and interrupting the even tenor of his holy walking in covenant with his God (chap. xvi.)

For the offence, though not in his case prompted by carnal appetite, bore nevertheless the fruit which the like offence always bears;—blunting the conscience, hardening the heart, and unfitting the whole inner man for the divine fellowship and communion. In the dreary blank, accordingly, of the long interval between the birth of Ishmael and the next recorded communication from on high,—a period of no less than thirteen years (chap. xvi. 16; xvii. 1), during which a dark cloud seems to rest upon the patriarch, such as nothing short of a fresh call and new revival can dispel,—we trace the miserable fruit of his backsliding. The Lord thus signalises his holy jealousy of the purity of the nuptial tie, by the hiding of his countenance for a time from the man whom he had chosen to be his friend, and the suspension of that intimate intercourse into which, as his friend, he had so graciously admitted him.

II. But “the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord; and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he

shall not be utterly cast down : for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand" (Psalm xxxvii. 23, 24).

The revival is eminently gracious. There is a mild rebuke of his former unbelief and guile, in the announcement, "I am the Almighty God," and in the invitation, "Walk before me and be thou perfect;" but there is relenting tenderness in the assurance—"I will make my covenant between me and thee" (ver. 2). It is as if the Lord were weary of the restraint which he had put upon himself, and could no longer refrain from returning to visit and bless his faithful servant. Yes! In spite of all that has passed, "I will make my covenant between me and thee." This unwonted estrangement has been long enough continued; we must be friends again.

The interview that follows is one of the spiritual epochs of Abraham's life. Viewed in connection with the renewal of the covenant, and the institution of the sacramental seal,—it was fitted to recover Abraham out of the depths into which he had been falling through his attempt to realise the divine purposes in a way of his own; and to bring him back to the safe and simple attitude of waiting patiently for the Lord's own fulfilment of them, and meanwhile addressing himself, in all humility, to the keeping of the Lord's commandments.

III. The culminating point of Abraham's exaltation, during the second period of his pilgrimage, is again to be found, as in the former, in connection with his conduct towards Lot. And the exaltation is on this occasion more signal than at the first. Then he manifestly had power, as a prince, to prevail over princes;—now he has power, as a friend, to prevail with God. The Lord visits him as a friend, and along with two attendant angels, accepts his hospitality, and sits familiarly at his table. He converses with him as a friend, not only on what personally concerns the patriarch himself,—the terms of the covenant, and the near approach of the time when Sarah is to have a son; but, what is a still more special proof of friendship, on his procedure as Governor among the

nations ;—as if he could hide nothing from Abraham. Thereafter, in the liberty of speech granted to the patriarch, as he pleads for the doomed cities, and in the assurance that what was done for the deliverance of Lot was done for his sake, the highest honour is conferred on him of which human nature can well be considered capable. And we stand in awe as we contemplate him thus illustriously signalised as “the friend of God.”

IV. But, alas ! the next “varying” scene of this “change-ful life” presents the patriarch in another light. The catastrophe of Sodom having led to the breaking up of his establishment in that neighbourhood, he is cast abroad as a wanderer again ; and in another part of the land of his pilgrimage, he is brought into contact with the people and the princes from whose lawless corruption of manners he has so much to apprehend. The new “strength” which “through faith” Sarah is at this time receiving “to bear seed,” implying probably the return of somewhat of her former attractiveness, is an additional embarrassment to the wanderer. His old expedient unhappily suggests itself to him again ; and though the same overruling hand that had brought good out of evil before, interposes now to avert a calamity that might have marred the whole design of the covenant as established in the promised seed, still the patriarch himself is sufficiently rebuked.

V. The actual fulfilment of the promise, in the birth of Isaac, might seem to be the fitting occasion for ending all strife between the flesh and the spirit,—between sense and faith. It is not so, however ;—at least not entirely. The joyous festivities at the birth and circumcision of Isaac are strangely blended with a sad domestic misunderstanding. The patriarch is seen halting between two opinions, and manifesting a sort of lurking preference for “the son of the bond-woman born after the flesh,” over “the son of the free-woman, born after the Spirit.” But at last he makes a final surrender of the confidence he has been tempted to build upon Ishmael.

He acquiesces in the arrangement,—so characteristic of the divine sovereignty, but so contrary to nature,—that the elder shall be postponed to the younger. He is made willing to commit the entire hope of his own inheritance, and of the world's salvation, solely and exclusively to the frail ark of that precarious life which has just begun to flicker in the feeble frame of one “born out of due time.”

VI. The scene on Mount Moriah forms the climax in this second part of Abraham's walk of faith,—as that midnight colloquy with the Lord under the starry heavens formed the climax in the first. Then the patriarch,—every outward adminicle of faith being absent, and not a ray of light shed on the means by which the divine word is to be made good,—has to take that bare word as his sole and sufficient security; and believing, he is declared to be justified before God. Now, after he has actually seen how God intends to fulfil his promise, and his faith on that point has become sensible experience, he is to forego all the advantage and help that sight and sense might afford; and once more he is required, in still more trying circumstances than before, “against hope to believe in hope.” For to believe before Isaac's birth was really not so hard a thing as to continue to believe in spite of Isaac's death. Then the trial turned upon the question,—Can Abraham trust God for the making good of his promise while the child of promise has not yet come? Now it turns on the far more testing question,—Can he hold fast his trust even when the child of promise is taken away? He stands the test, and is rewarded in standing it, for he “sees the day of Christ afar off, and is glad.”

VII. The closing incidents of Abraham's eventful history—his grief for Sarah's death and care for her burial,—the blessedness of securing a suitable wife for Isaac,—his own entrance a second time into the marriage-state, and becoming thus literally as well as spiritually the father of many nations,—his timely settlement of his worldly affairs,—his quiet death in a good old

age, and his burial, at which both his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, took part,—these several particulars might all admit of separate notices ; but a single general remark may suffice.

It is the sunset of a hot day of trial,—the heat and burden of which have been spent in the searching furnace of divine light and love. The quiet domestic chronicle comes in with a sad yet soothing charm, to wind up the wanderer's agitated career. The crisis is now over. The power of faith has been tested to the uttermost. The patriarch has been enabled to "overcome when he is tempted." And now he calmly makes preparation for his departure, and for the accomplishment of the Lord's will when he is gone. It is a peaceful twilight, coming after a long troubled day,—ushering in the repose of a serene night—that awaits a brighter dawn.

I pass from this summary of the life and character of "the father of the faithful" reluctantly, and with a feeling of utter inadequacy to do justice to the theme. Running the eye again over the successive vicissitudes of his history,—all minute criticism and special pleading apart,—we must note faults and failings for which we ought not to apologise ; but we must also close the survey with a deeper impression than ever of the majesty with which, in the hands of a spiritual and poetic word-painter, this great example of faith might be invested. Of the original and natural temperament of Abraham, independently of his call as a believer, but few traces can be discerned. He was already an old man when he received the summons to forsake all for the Lord's sake ; and of what he was and what he did, before that era, Scripture says not a word, beyond the bare intimation that he was beginning, at least, to be involved in the growing idolatry of the age. I am persuaded, however, that if the devout students of God's word and ways would throw themselves into this history of Abraham's pilgrimage, with more of human sympathy than they sometimes do,—and with less of that captious spirit which

a cold infidelity has engendered,—they would see more and more of the patriarch's warmth and tenderness of heart, as well as of his loyalty to that God whose call and covenant he so unreservedly embraced.

One word more in conclusion as to the faith of Abraham, viewed in its objective, and not merely in its subjective aspect. The truths on which his believing confidence laid hold are plain enough. A present justifying righteousness, and a future heavenly inheritance—these were the objects which his faith grasped, with a tenacity all his own. As a sinner, he apprehended a divinely-provided righteousness on the ground of which he had pardon and peace. As a child of God, he looked for a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God ; he walked as an heir of unseen glory. And in both particulars, he is an example to all believers. Nor is it of any material consequence to speculate on the amount of knowledge which Abraham may have had, with regard either to the righteousness which by faith he appropriated, or to the inheritance which in hope he anticipated. How far he had a clear and definite view of the great principle of substitution upon which the believer's acceptance, through the blood of an atoning sacrifice, depends—still more, how far he had any adequate conception of the person and work of the Substitute who was, in the fulness of time, to live on the earth, and die, and rise again—may be matter of doubtful disputation. And it may be impossible to determine with absolute certainty whether he identified the inheritance promised to him with the land in which he sojourned, or merely looked in a general way for a portion in the resurrection-state, or in the world to come, that might fairly be regarded as an equivalent. The main facts as to his faith and hope are these two :—first, that Abraham trusted in a righteousness not his own for his justification in the sight of God—and secondly, that he sought his rest and reward in a heritage of glory beyond the grave.

We may have clearer light on both of these points ; if so, then so much the greater is our responsibility. And it will be good for us if, by the grace of God, we are enabled to live up to our clearer light, as conscientiously as Abraham lived up to his more imperfect illumination—walking before God in uprightness, as he did—and as strangers and pilgrims on the earth declaring plainly that “ we seek a better country, even a heavenly.”

XXXIV.

THE FAMILY OF ISAAC—THE ORACLE RESPECTING
JACOB AND ESAU.

GENESIS XXV. 19-28.

AFTER noticing the death of Abraham, the sacred narrative proceeds to trace the two principal lines of succession in which his name and memory are to be perpetuated. These lines are at the very outset found widely diverging. The patriarch's two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, met indeed at the funeral of their aged parent, and united in paying the last tribute of filial respect to his remains (ver. 9, 10). But thereafter, as it would seem, they finally separated from one another.

To Ishmael and his "generations," the sacred history devotes but a brief space (xxv. 12-18). It simply notices the first steps towards the actual fulfilment of the prophecies that had been given respecting him to sustain the drooping spirits of his mother (xvi. 10-12 ; xxi. 18) ; and to reconcile Abraham to the "casting out" of his first-born (xvii. 20 ; xxi. 13). In two particulars, especially, these prophecies began to be accomplished to the very letter in Ishmael's own day. In the first place, he became the father of "twelve princes" (ver. 16). And, secondly, he "fell," or in other words, his lot fell "in the presence of all his brethren." He was put into secure possession of that independent footing—on the very frontiers of the territory occupied by "his brethren," and as if in defiance of

their power—which his descendants, the roving tribes of Arabia, have ever since continued to maintain.*

The inspired narrative, however, is chiefly occupied with the transmission of the covenant birthright ; and accordingly, after this brief glance at “the generations of Ishmael,” it returns to the more congenial task of tracing the line of Isaac.

The period during which that patriarch was the head of the chosen family is comparatively one of repose ; it comes in as a sort of quiet calm between the manifold trials of his father Abraham’s life, and the still more agitating career that awaited his son Jacob. The course of Isaac’s life appears to run smooth ; his own character is tranquil ; and so also is his history. Whatever disturbance vexes that tranquillity, belongs rather to the opening of Jacob’s troubled experience than to the placid routine of his father Isaac’s pilgrimage.

The key to this portion of the history is to be found in the divine purpose respecting the birth of Isaac’s sons ; and in dealing with the matter historically, it is with the oracular promulgation of that purpose that we are chiefly concerned. The reason moving the divine mind to prefer the younger to the elder,—or justifying and accounting for the preference,—is not within the scope of any inquiry suggested by the narrative. It is not with the prophet Malachi’s use, or the apostle Paul’s use, of this divine decree that we have now to concern ourselves,—but solely and exclusively with its publication, and the result of its publication, as given to us by the inspired historian.

For the decree was embodied in an oracle to the house of Isaac, and so became one of those “things that are revealed” which “belong to us and to our children ;” although still the reason of the decree, continuing to be unrevealed, is one of the

* I prefer the marginal reading “fell” to that of the text “died.” The passage is obscure ; but it seems to indicate the beginning of Ishmael’s occupancy of the position assigned to him in the prophecy.

“secret things belonging to the Lord our God,” which we can but reverently adore (Deut. xxix. 29).*

An anxious wife, who, with her husband, has waited long and prayed for the blessing, is about to become the mother of the promised seed. Moved by signs that seem to betoken either personal danger to herself, or something strange respecting her offspring, she hastens to consult and inquire of the Lord (ver. 21, 22). In reply, she is told that she is to be the mother of two nations, that are to differ widely from one another in “strength,” or in other words, in spiritual privileges and secular power. And farther, she is warned that in the transmission of the birthright the order of nature is to be reversed:—“The elder shall serve the younger” (ver. 23).

This announcement to Rebekah was surely intended to be made known. The pious mother was not, like Mary, to ponder all these things in her heart; she was to speak of them to all her house. And, accordingly, the subsequent history, with its sad indications of human infirmity, sufficiently shows that

* This distinction between the announcement of the decree in the history, and the use made of it in the prophecy of Malachi and the epistle of Paul, it is most important to observe throughout. The announcement in the history is prospective; the reference to it in the prophecy and epistle is retrospective. In the history, it takes its place among the things at the time revealed, which belong to God’s people and to their children; in the prophecy and epistle, it is considered as ranking among the secret things which belong to the Lord their God. Doubtless, it is the same divine decree in both instances. But in the one case, it is the decree, as it was made known beforehand to the actors in the scenes or incidents to which it relates; in the other, it is the decree, as it existed from all eternity in the divine mind, brought forward, as it were, by way of an after-statement, to vindicate the divine procedure and silence cavilling objectors, long after these actors are all off the stage. In the one case, it is the commandment issued in good time to the parties personally interested,—to be obeyed; in the other, it is the comment or reflection, suggested subsequently to their successors,—to be improved.

this divine oracle was no secret in the family ; the whole interest of it, painful as it is, turns on that fact.

And the knowledge of the decree was really, to all the parties concerned, a proclamation of the gospel. It directed them to the quarter from whence the Saviour was to come. It pointed out Jacob as virtually for the time the representative of the Redeemer ; and in him, the far-reaching eye of faith might have seen, with more or less distinctness, the day of Christ afar off. By that faith, accordingly, the household might have been regulated. If it had been so, all would have been benefited.

Jacob himself, had he rightly and spiritually apprehended the prerogative conveyed to him, would have been humbled, rather than elated, by the distinction. He would have counted all the other privileges of his birthright as loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of that Saviour who was to spring from him. Esau, again, would neither have envied nor despised the blessing centred in his brother Jacob. Acquiescing in the sovereignty of God, he would have been contented to acknowledge his dependence, for all spiritual and saving benefits, not on Jacob, as personally his superior, but on that promised "Seed of the woman," of whom it now appeared that Jacob was to be the father. And the parents, understanding and submitting to the will of God, would have agreed together in assigning to Jacob his proper place, as not in himself, or on his own account, to be preferred to his brother, but only in respect of his being the root of that elect "Branch," in whom, with the whole multitude of the redeemed of every age and clime, they are all one. Favouritism, partiality, rivalry, deceit, strife,—all might have been averted from this house, if only the declared and revealed counsel of God had been believed and acted upon.

Alas for the infirmity of faith and the deceitfulness of man's desperately wicked heart ! The very word of God, which should have been a bond of union, became a root of

bitterness and an element of unholy contention. In Jacob, a selfish and self-righteous spirit appropriated the covenant-blessing as a matter, not of grace, but of right. It became, in his eyes, a personal distinction, to be vindicated by the usual methods of worldly force or fraud. The fitful mind of Esau alternated between moody and sullen discontent on the one hand, and those softer relentings on the other—those gushes of childlike tenderness—those outbursts of passionate grief—to which the most rugged nature is often most easily moved and melted. A mother's fond partiality made Rebekah turn the oracle, given as a ground of spiritual faith and hope, into a warrant for gratifying her own natural affections ;—and tempted her to believe that in accomplishing God's ends by her own craft, she was doing God service. While in regard to the patriarch Isaac himself—a man of God from his youth—a man of prayer—what shall we say ?

Would that this pious man had understood aright the footing on which the oracle placed both Jacob and Esau, and indeed all the household ! Would that he had used his influence, and exerted his parental authority, to enforce compliance with the oracle in its true spiritual meaning ! Then he might have removed all occasion of self-righteous complacency on the part of Jacob, as well as of dark jealousy on the part of Esau. Then he would have superseded, by a timely and equitable settlement, the whole wretched train of plots, stratagems, and wiles that make his household history so sad. From the first he might have taught Jacob to regard the birthright so specially given to him by divine decree, as chiefly valuable, not only on account of the spiritual blessings which it bestowed, but also on account of its bestowing them all so freely as to embrace his brother Esau, if Esau will consent to have them. No occasion would have been given for Rebekah's crooked policy ; for she would have been satisfied to fall in with his faithful teaching. And at last, in his old age, he might have had something better than a remnant of

earthly good to give, in answer to Esau's pathetic pleading, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!" True, he had but "one blessing,"—one real blessing worthy of the name,—the blessing of Abraham with which he had just blessed Jacob. But the salvation that was to come through Abraham's seed, though it was to be of Jacob, was yet to be for all that would believe. And in Jacob's blessing,—as the patriarch might have taught his weeping and groaning son,—even he need not despair of having a share, if he will but believe. For "it is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ cometh into the world to save sinners," and thee, too, Esau, if thou canst but bring thyself to add, "of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. i. 15).

The true secret of family peace is to be found in setting up Christ, and Christ alone, as all in all. Let father, mother, sisters, brothers, all submit themselves to Christ; and they will be ready in Christ to submit themselves to one another. Members of Christ's body, and members one of another, they will together, as a household, "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

XXXV.

PARENTAL FAVOURITISM AND FRATERNAL FEUD.

GENESIS XXV. 27-34.

"THE boys grew" (ver. 27); and it would seem that, as they grew they were suffered very much to follow the bent of their own inclinations in the choice of their respective occupations. Their natures were different; and the difference, apparent in their very birth, was significantly indicated in their names. The rough and ruddy aspect of the first-born led to his being called by a name denoting rugged strength; while the seemingly accidental circumstance attending his brother's entrance into the world—"his hand taking hold of the other's heel"—suggested the name to which Esau afterwards so bitterly alludes (chap. xxvii. 36): "Is not he rightly named Jacob," or supplanter; one who takes his brother by the heel.

With these names the brothers, as they grew up, soon began to show that their natures remarkably corresponded. Esau's bold spirit found its fitting sphere of exercise in the excitement of the chase and the wild sports of the field. Jacob, again, being of a milder disposition, addicted himself to more domestic pursuits. He was disposed to lead a quiet pastoral life. He dwelt in tents, following the profession of a shepherd-farmer, tending his flocks and herds, and tilling the soil (ver. 27-28).

But the difference between them was probably one of rank as well as taste. Esau's manner of life was not only

the result of his own inclination, but the indication also of his being accounted the elder son and heir. The pursuits to which he was devoted were of that noble character which the first-born of the earth have always affected ; while Jacob, on the other hand, appears to have had the drudgery of a more servile and menial toil imposed upon him. He was thus early familiarised to such service as that which he afterwards rendered for his two wives to his kinsman Laban.

In fact, before his father's death, Jacob did not derive any temporal advantage from the privilege of the prior title to the birthright, which the oracle had conveyed to him. So far as his position can be gathered from the brief notices of the history, he is seen from the first occupying a subordinate place in the household,—engaged in the offices and duties of domestic service ; while Esau assumes the air of a prince, and addict himself to princely sports. Thus “the boys grew.”

How their parents discharged towards them the parental duties is not told ; one thing only is revealed—that “Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (ver. 28). The silence of the Holy Spirit respecting all except this single fact is a solemn and emphatic warning. It is as if the Spirit meant to indicate that all the good of the godly rearing which these parents gave to their children was marred by the indulgence of their favouritism.

Let the real fault, however, which Isaac and Rebekah committed in the rearing of their sons, be quite understood. Let it be considered once again what their conduct would have been, had they rightly apprehended and acted upon the oracle which pointed out to them the line of the future Saviour.

They were taught to see in their younger son Jacob the father of the Messiah—of him who was to bruise the serpent's head and bless all the families of the earth ; and doubtless this would have warranted a certain kind and measure of preference for Jacob. But it would not have been after the flesh. On the contrary, as they looked in faith on the fair child who

was constituted to them, as it were, the representative of Christ—Jacob would have faded away from before their eyes; and a greater than Jacob would have appeared. And calling to mind the scene on Mount Moriah, in which he himself bore so great a part, Isaac might have directed Rebekah, and the rude Esau, and plain Jacob also, to fix their spiritual contemplation on the one Redeemer, the one propitiation for sin, whose day his father Abraham rejoiced to see afar off.

For who then is Jacob?—or who is Esau?—that might have been the humble exclamation of the united household. Jacob may be honoured on account of the Saviour who is in his loins. But personally, what is Jacob the better for that distinction, or what is Esau the worse for wanting it? To be the ancestor of the Messiah is to be indeed great. But to be “least in the kingdom of heaven” is to be greater still. And that distinction might have been reached by Esau!

Thus, in this family—in which there was too much disputing “who should be the greatest,” it had been good for all parties if a little child had been set in the midst of them, and it had been said to one and all of them—Be as this little child. And how good beyond all calculation would it have been for them, if the little child so set in the midst had been none other than the “holy child Jesus;” the very Saviour of whom Jacob was to be the sire! Then it might have been seen “how pleasant a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity;” in the unity which is like “the precious ointment” flowing over the whole body of the high priest, from the head to the lowest members, making all one; the unity which the Spirit, poured out from heaven inspires, as “the dew of Hermon descends on the mountains of Zion,” enriching all with one common blessing—the unity, in a word, of faith and love.

Set up, ye Christian parents, in the midst of your children, Christ and Christ alone. Set not up one child above another, but set up Christ above all. Let not Isaac love Esau because

he "eats of his venison,"—sympathising in his venturous trade, and enjoying the fruit of it. Let not Rebekah love the more peaceful Jacob, because, dwelling in tents, he gives her more of his company and companionship. But let both learn to love their children in the Lord. Isaac need not withdraw his affection from Esau, nor need Rebekah greatly moderate her attachment to Jacob. But let Isaac direct Esau, as a poor sinner, to the salvation which is to be of Jacob. And let Rebekah commend that same salvation to Jacob, as standing equally in need of it with his brother Esau. So shall they all—husband, wife, and children—be truly one—one in their sense of their own great poverty and sinfulness—one in their apprehension of the righteousness and the unsearchable riches of Christ. Alas! that it should turn out otherwise, and with such disastrous results.

The first evil issue of the opposite course pursued is the transaction of the sale of the birthright (29-34); a melancholy instance of the manner in which trifles may bring out deep-seated springs of action, and may lead to serious consequences. For what could be apparently more trifling than the occasion here described?

A weary and hungry hunter, returning home from the exploits of the field, finds a savoury mess prepared, as if seasonably to meet his wants. It is the very food which he most relishes at any time; and at this time it is doubly welcome. It is provided also by his own brother's hand; and certainly his brother stands in no such need of it as he does. What more natural than that a brother should ask food of a brother? What need of any terms of purchase, or any driving of a hard bargain?

"Sell me this day thy birthright." What a proposal! How unkind, ungenerous, unbrotherly! What has this pottage,—this same red pottage of thine, brother Jacob,—to do with the privilege of succeeding, as the first-born, to our father's inheritance? Especially if, as thou sayest, thou hast that

envied distinction already by decree of the oracle at our birth, —and if thou valuest it, as thou professest to do, not as a temporal and earthly, but as a spiritual and eternal blessing, —wilt thou make it a commodity exchangeable for a morsel of perishable meat?

Most justly might Jacob have been thus answered; and if thus answered, he must have been silenced. For he had put himself in a false position. Doubtless, in this negotiation with his brother, he considered himself, not as purchasing what did not previously belong to him, but as barring a claim which Esau wrongfully set up, and in the setting up of which he had the countenance of a too partial parent. The birthright was Jacob's already;—by the divine decree, solemnly promulgated. That in spite of this decree Esau was allowed to enjoy the privileges of the first-born, Jacob might truly regard as a usurpation. And now he might think an opportunity offered itself for putting an end to Esau's claim for ever, by his own consent, and by express stipulation. Nor was it really taking any unfair advantage of Esau's peculiar straits; since, even if the concession were extorted from him by sheer physical necessity, it was a concession strictly due.

Vain apology! Does Jacob really believe that the birthright is his, by the express destination of God? Then, may he not leave it to God himself to make good his own word? Is it not the most presumptuous and offensive form of unbelief to adopt expedients of our own for bringing to pass the counsels of the Most High? Yes; it is unbelief; Jacob sinned through unbelief. He did not simply trust in God, and leave it to God to effect his own designs in his own way. Heir as he was of the birthright, he would make assurance doubly sure, and would have the decree of Jehovah countersigned and sealed by the covenant of a frail brother of the dust;—a covenant, too, extorted by a scheme most revolting to natural affection, as well as to spiritual uprightness and truth.

Can it indeed be a spiritual blessing which Jacob thinks,

by such a carnal and worldly policy, to secure? It may be so. And indeed it does not appear that Jacob here assumed or possessed the right of primogeniture, in a temporal sense. It would really seem that he valued the birthright chiefly as a spiritual privilege and prerogative. But if so, surely his sin in this instance is all the greater. Does he think to purchase the Holy Ghost with money,—the heavenly inheritance with a mess of pottage? Or, viewing the transaction in the least offensive light,—as a bargain, not for the possession of a blessing already his, but for the setting aside of an unwarranted claim to it by another party,—what a poor spirit of compromise does it display! Let it be even persecution that Jacob suffered at the hands of Esau,—is persecution to be bought off by a mess of pottage? Is the antagonist of our spiritual principles, or the enemy of our spiritual peace, when he applies to us for help and we have the means of doing him a service, to be refused, or be kept waiting, until we adjust with him the terms of a conventional truce, and bargain with him at least for neutrality? Is that the spirit of Christian brotherhood or of Christian charity? Were it not better that Jacob, wronged and injured by having his birthright withheld, should “heap coals of fire on the head” of the usurper? Might he not thus have “overcome evil with good,” and so gained his brother?

As it was, what did he gain? The bargain is concluded,—the price is paid. Is the blessing more securely his now than it was before? On the contrary, does not the very sinfulness of the expedient resorted to,—the wretchedness of the device by which he sought to make the blessing his own for ever,—only serve to show that if it ever actually become his at all, it is not by his might or merit or wisdom, but altogether and exclusively by the sovereign decree, the free grace, and the free Spirit of God alone.

But Jacob’s fault will not make Esau guiltless. His great sin stands condemned in both Testaments. “He despised his birthright,” says the historian (ver. 34). As “a profane per-

son, he for one morsel of meat sold his birthright," says the epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. xii. 16).

"He despised his birthright;"—selling it for a mess of pottage,—“that same red pottage,”—as he himself describes it, with all the emphasis of genuine epicurean longing,—“that red—that very red pottage”—so tempting in its appearance—of which the hunter was so fond that its very name stuck to him as a distinction, and he was called Edom, or “the red,” from this very incident (ver. 30).

Feed me, he says, abandoning himself to the delights of appetite,—as the keen sportsman will crown his day of hard exercise in the field with an evening of indulgence at the table;—feed me with that same red pottage, whose savoury odour already overcomes me. And then, when he hears the condition so artfully proposed to him,—instead of resisting the tempter and seeking relief elsewhere, how contemptuously does he speak! “The birthright!” he exclaims. What good will the birthright do to me, if in the meantime I starve and die? Will it feed me? Will it gratify my taste and satisfy my hunger? Nay, rather let me have that same red pottage,—which is a present and substantial good. And take thou, if thou choosest, that birthright, whose shadowy and remote advantages it seems thou prizest so highly!

That it was in some such way, and in some such spirit, that Esau “despised his birthright,” may appear, not only from the inspired testimony, but from the very circumstances of the case. For, in the first place, Esau could scarcely, on this occasion, be really in very great straits for food. He was not a prodigal perishing with hunger,—but an elder son, treated as such, returning from a day’s sport. Had he been actuated by a right spirit,—had he even felt that high sense of honour of which men of the world, like himself, make so much boast,—would he not have spurned the pitiful proposal of his brother Jacob, and preferred a dry crust of bread and cup of water to all the dainties with which this “plain man” would

seduce or bribe him ? Then again, secondly, it was evidently the spiritual blessing implied in the birthright that Esau held in such light esteem ; there is no appearance of his meaning to resign any of its temporal advantages. Had it been merely a secular or worldly distinction that he bartered for the gratification of his appetite, there might have been folly in the transaction,—and sin also,—but not the sin of profanity with which he is unequivocally charged. The presumption is, that both the brothers understood the bargain to relate to the much coveted honour of being the ancestor of the Messiah, and sharing in the blessings which the Messiah was to bestow. That privilege Esau despises ; using the argument of profane unbelief ;—Who or what is the promised seed that I should wait for him at the expense and sacrifice of this red pottage ? What profit shall I have of this spiritual faith and hope ? What gain will this godliness be to me ?

In this view, what a solemn lesson may we learn from Jacob's conduct ; especially in its bearing upon his brother Esau's character and fate !

Jacob was probably even now professedly a more spiritual man than his brother Esau ; apprehending in some measure his need of spiritual blessings, and the value of these blessings, as they were to flow from the Messiah destined to spring out of his loins. But what then ? By what means did he seek to secure these blessings to himself ? And what pains did he take to commend them to his brother ? Ah ! if he had simply trusted in the sure word of God, and left to God himself the fulfilment of it,—how little did it really matter whether Esau recognised his character and claims or not ? If Christ were indeed “ formed in him, the hope of glory,”—was it for him to be careful about the esteem in which his brother might hold him ? Rather, might he not present to that brother the same Christ in whom he himself believed ? And instead of the language which he virtually used to Esau :—Take thou this earthly portion and leave me the better birthright ;—his invitation might have been to him to share with him freely and

fully in both. In pursuing a very different course, he cannot be held guiltless of a participation in his brother's sin; he is in fact his tempter. He uses means, and adopts a line of conduct fitted to bring out his brother's contempt of spiritual things. And whatever he may say as to its being merely for the purpose of securing what is already his by divine right,—he cannot be acquitted of cruelty and crime, in seeking to profit by his brother's straits, and turn his brother's fleshly desire to his own account.

But after all, every man must bear his own burden; and Esau must not escape censure, even though it may have been a brother's infirmity of faith, or defect of love, that proved the occasion of his apostasy. It was in his heart to "despise the birthright," when he sold it. And the deed, alas! admitted of no recall; for "he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (Heb. xii. 17).

What may be the full meaning of that ominous and appalling statement, I do not now inquire; but one thing it unequivocally attests. Whatever may have been Jacob's sin in the matter, the Lord intended, through his instrumentality, to bring the question of Esau's spiritual state to a prompt and peremptory decision. The alternative is plainly proposed to him. He has to choose between the birthright blessing—in which he still might have found an interest, if he had been willing to own Jacob in the character that the oracle assigned to him—and the carnal indulgence on which his heart is set. It is a decisive choice he has to make; he is shut up to an instant and final determination, one way or other. He does determine. And it is without the possibility of any recall.

Is there no such crisis in the experience of a sinner now? May not one who has long been hesitating between God and Mammon be brought at some anxious moment to a point at which the irrevocable choice must be made? Can any one be sure that his very next choice may not be that irrevocable one? Dare any one, considering this, trifle with such scrip-

tural exhortations as these?—"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve," "How long halt ye between two opinions: if the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him;" "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts," lest the sentence go forth against you, "I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest."

XXXVI.

GENESIS XXVI.

THE CHOSEN FAMILY UNDER ISAAC—HIS PERSONAL
ADVENTURES IN HIS PILGRIMAGE.

I PASS hastily over the incidents of Isaac's pilgrimage recorded in this twenty-sixth chapter,—not because they are void of practical interest,—but partly because they are so similar to corresponding events in Abraham's career as to be almost literal repetitions of them,—and partly also for another reason ;—to concentrate attention on the special peculiarity of the believing household's history during this period, as we have the key to it in the oracle accompanying the birth of the twin brothers.

The resemblance of Isaac's experience, during the brief space of time which he spent as a pilgrim, to the previous experience of his father Abraham in similar circumstances, is not a little striking.

We have a famine, breaking up the establishment at Lahai-roi, where, after the death of Abraham, Isaac dwelt (xxv. 11). And this circumstance leads to a temporary sojourn at Gerar among the Philistines (xxvi. 1). There the Lord appears to him, to arrest him in the purpose he seems to have formed of going down for greater plenty to Egypt, that granary and storehouse of the ancient world ; and at the same time to renew to him the promises, temporal and spiritual, which had been ratified by the divine oath to Abraham. Thus "Isaac dwelt in Gerar" (ver. 2-6) ; and in Gerar the son repeats the sad offence twice committed by his father.

In the very place in which, on the second occasion, Abraham had recourse to the expedient of an evasive policy, through fear of the corrupt manners of the age, Isaac is tempted to equivocate respecting his wife, in the very same way, and with the very same result too; scarcely escaping death, or dishonour worse than death; and exposing himself to the humiliating and indignant reproof of the prince whom he so unjustly distrusted (ver. 7-11). Thereafter, we have an account of Isaac's growing prosperity, and of the increase of his wealth in flocks and herds (ver. 12-14); an increase which leads to the usual consequences that were wont to follow in these days. We read of jealous heartburnings on the part of the people of the land;—"The Philistines envied him." Then we trace the fruit of this envy in proposals of separation, for the sake of peace, on the part of their prince; frequent removals in search of room; and interminable misunderstandings and strifes among the herdmen about wells (ver. 12-22). And there is this aggravation,—that besides the ordinary disputes apt to arise between parties feeding large quantities of cattle near one another,—questions of hereditary right are raised, and complaints have to be made on behalf of Isaac, as to the wrong done by the Philistines, in stopping the wells which his father Abraham's servants had digged (ver. 18).

At last, after a vexatious, though not lengthened course of wandering and contention, Isaac returns to the vicinity of his former dwelling-place; and at Beersheba receives anew a personal visit from the Lord; has the covenant again confirmed to him; and prepares, as it would seem, permanently to take up there his henceforth unmolested abode (ver. 23-25).

And, to complete the parallel, the narrative closes with the transaction between Isaac and the ruler of the country where he had been sojourning. That prince, with the chief captain of his army, hastens, evidently in some alarm, to appease the patriarch's resentment and conciliate his favour, by a friendly overture:—"Let there be now an oath betwixt us, even be-

twixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee ; that thou wilt do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done unto thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace" (ver. 26-29). Whereupon Isaac enters once more into a treaty,—identical with that to which his father Abraham had consented to swear,—on the same precise spot, and beside the same precise well,—which thus a second time merits and regains its appellation of "Beer-sheba"—the well of the oath (ver. 30-33).

So exact a similarity, even down to minute particulars, between the story of the son's pilgrimage and that of the father, may very possibly create difficulty in certain minds. And at this distance of time, both from the occurrence of the events and from the recording of them, it may be beyond our power to account for it altogether satisfactorily. That the king of Gerar and his prime minister, or commander-in-chief, should bear the same names that the corresponding personages bore in Abraham's time,—Abimelech and Phichol,—may be easily enough explained, according to eastern usage, upon the supposition of these being hereditary titles of hereditary offices. But it does seem somewhat strange that the very details of the adventures which the father and the son respectively underwent, should be to so great an extent identically the same. Let it be observed, however, that the picturesque and graphic annals of that older time are apt to cast into the same type or mould analogous events, and successions of events. They seize upon the features that are identical, without dwelling upon circumstantial differences ; and thus they give to the whole narrative a somewhat artificial appearance of even literal repetition. Then, again, let it be remembered, that the domestic manners of the East have always been far less liable to change from generation to generation, and have always had far more of a sort of stereotyped character, than the manners of other countries and later ages with which we are more familiar.

And, above all, let it be considered that there was a wise purpose to be served by the plain and palpable identification of Isaac, as the heir, with Abraham, whose successor and representative he was. It was important that he should be recognised and acknowledged by the nations and kings with whom Abraham had been called to mingle. And it may well be ascribed to the immediate and special ordering of the providence of God, that the younger patriarch was appointed or allowed to retrace and revive the footsteps of his predecessor's pilgrimage;—as well as to re-open the wells which, under his father's auspices, had been dug.

One thing, however, distinguishes the experience of Isaac. His career as a wanderer is a kind of episode in his history ; for the most part, his life is settled and sedentary. Sixty years at least, and probably more than sixty, had passed over his head before he was called to remove from the place where Abraham had latterly pitched his tent ; for we may safely conclude that Isaac did not go to Gerar until after the birth of his two sons, and the transaction between them respecting the sale of the birthright. Then we must certainly suppose him to have been settled again at Beer-sheba before Esau's unhappy marriage with two daughters of the proscribed race. Thus the years of Isaac's wandering must be reduced to some eight or ten at the utmost. And we find him restored, in his eightieth year, to that comparatively quiet course of life which for nearly a century thereafter he continued to follow,—until he died peacefully at the age of an hundred and fourscore years (chap. xxxv. 28, 29).

How that long period of an entire century was spent—what was Isaac's habitual occupation, and what vicissitudes were apt to vary the uniformity of its routine—we have no means of even conjecturing. All that we learn with respect to it, in so far as Isaac himself is concerned, is comprised in the memorable incident of his final and decisive bestowal of the blessing (chap. xxxvii.) Nor is it easy to fix exactly the date

of that incident, so as to adjust it to the prolonged continuance of Isaac's life and sojourn in the land. That he lived some considerable time after the scene of the benediction, is evident from the fact that Jacob found him still alive when he returned from his residence in Laban's family ; for he joined with Esau in rendering the last offices of filial love (xxxv. 29). But at the same time it is equally evident that it was upon his deathbed, at least in his own opinion, that Isaac transacted the affair which led to Jacob's exile. It was as a dying man that he meant to dispose of the birthright-blessing. And however long he may have lingered afterwards on the earth, we are to consider the twenty-seventh chapter, the chapter with which we have next to deal, as virtually recording his dying bequest—his final and irrevocable legacy.

XXXVII.

GENESIS XXVII.

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE BIRTHRIGHT-BLESSING.

WE now enter upon the most pathetic of all the narratives in this book—if we except, perhaps, that of Joseph's discovery of himself to his brethren. And we enter upon it, not to mar it by any paraphrastic commentary, but merely to apply to it the key furnished by the oracle of God ;—"The elder shall serve the younger." In the light of that oracle let us review the history.

The struggle between sense and faith is nowhere in all the Bible more painfully brought out than here ; it might almost seem, indeed, as if the scene were meant to be as much a trial of those who are mere spectators of it, through the perusal of the inspired narrative, as it was of those who were originally and personally engaged in it.

In general, it may be observed that the sacred history, especially in the Old Testament, often makes a strong demand upon the faith of readers ; at least it makes a demand on that peculiar exercise of faith which consists in obedience to the peremptory injunction—"Be still and know that I am God." The sovereignty of God, as the direct and immediate cause of whatsoever comes to pass,—together with the absolute vanity of all subordinate agents,—fills the mind with awe ;—while the open and undisguised, nay, as it would seem, minute and elaborate exposure of human weakness and sin, would almost make one echo in sad earnest what the Psalmist said in his

haste, "All men are liars" (Ps. cxvi. 11). It happens too, here, as in other instances in which the divine and human elements are combined, that the balance, in the comparison of character and conduct, is often felt to be in favour rather of those who are opposing, than of those who are carrying out, the divine will. The blessing reaches him for whom it is intended, in a way that is apt to connect it, in our esteem, with the idea of ill-gotten gain; and sympathy is enlisted on the side of the real usurper. His impiety in aspiring to that rank which, by the divine declaration as well as by his own consent, now belonged to another, is lost sight of in the generous indignation with which we resent the fraud put upon him, and the deep compassion with which we listen to the plaintive pleadings of his despair.

Hence, in estimating aright the moral and spiritual bearing of such a narrative as this, we have to guard against a double danger. On the one hand, we may be tempted to extenuate or excuse the sins of those who are taking part with God, and seeking to fulfil his purpose; and, in so doing, we may run the risk of compromising God's holy law, and lowering our own sense of truth and right. Or again, on the other hand, we may allow our just indignation against the faults into which we see the professing people of God betrayed, to carry us too far in the direction of an unjust and uncharitable judgment of their whole profession. We may thus strengthen in ourselves and others a prejudice, not only against the godly, but against their godliness itself, such as may be any thing but conducive to the spiritual prosperity either of our own souls or of theirs. The first error is the most natural of the two to the natural mind; and it is an error which the perusal of this story, under the influence of merely natural feelings, is very apt to foster. A generous heart revolts from the meanness of Jacob's poor trick—and lavishes all its sympathy on Esau's bitter disappointment.

There is a lesson in all this of much practical importance. To those who would be accounted the people of God, it says

emphatically : Consider in what light your conduct will appear to the world of onlookers around you. At the very best, they are not apt to be prepossessed in your favour ; and if they do not actually watch for your halting, you need not at any rate expect them either to break your fall, or to cover your nakedness. Nor are they to be altogether blamed. Not only are the sins that may be found in you more offensive to a correct natural taste, than the same sins in others who do not make your profession ; but the kind of sins to which religious men are tempted, are often such as the natural conscience more instinctively condemns, than it does the open excesses of the thoughtless children of pleasure. The virtues of nature—although for the most part merely constitutional—the frankness, bravery, lightheartedness, and good humour that spring from an easy temper, and a large flow of animal spirits, command universal sympathy. Even the vices of nature, unbroken and untamed—its honest outbursts of passion—its frailties leaning to virtue's side—are frequently such as to attract rather than repel the lover of what is generous, manly, and sincere. On the other hand, the meek and lowly graces which religion cultivates have but little comeliness in the sight of eyes dazzled with more gaudy colours. The deep exercises of soul, again, that religion occasions, are not always favourable to that equanimity which it is so easy for one believing neither in heaven nor in hell to assume. And it must be confessed, also, that the vices which a religious profession admits of, or tolerates, as not flagrantly inconsistent with itself, are apt to be such as a man of worldly honour most indignantly repudiates. The mere name of godliness is at variance with the more splendid follies which the world conspires to idolise ; while alas ! that name, and even the reality, is sometimes found to be but too compatible with other violations of the strict rule of honourable conduct, such as the world itself is foremost to disown.

What a motive is thus presented to watchfulness over their whole conduct on the part of the people of God ! But

for the ungodly, it will be but poor consolation that in their resentment of Jacob's inexcusable fault, they exclude themselves from the covenant of Jacob's God.

In my brief review of this affecting narrative, I mean to notice the persons interested in it, in the order in which they come upon the stage, after the purpose of Isaac is formed in his own mind, intimated to his son Esau, and by some means or other reported to his wife Rebekah. According to this arrangement, Rebekah herself is the first to claim attention; then, secondly, her favourite Jacob; in the third place, the patriarch Isaac himself; and lastly, the unhappy Esau.

I. Of all the parties concerned, Rebekah is the one most easily given over, by ordinary readers, to summary and condign condemnation; nor would it be safe to call in question the all but unanimous verdict of the church, as well as the world, against her conduct in this case. But it is important that the real nature of her offence should be ascertained and recognised. It is not merely the indulgence of a fond mother's doting and unreasonable partiality that we have here to deal with. It is a sore trial of spiritual faith that this mother in Israel has to sustain.

The divine oracle is, to all human appearance, on the point of being frustrated and made void—Isaac is about to thwart the revealed purpose of God. The known will of her God, and the known intention of her husband, are irreconcilably at variance. God has destined the Abrahamic promise to the line of Jacob; Isaac is about to vest it in the lineage of Esau. And the crisis is urgent. The transaction for which Isaac is preparing himself is understood to be decisive. It is no ordinary or everyday occurrence. The head of the chosen household is, or imagines himself to be, on his deathbed; and what he may say or do now, especially with reference to the transmission of the birthright, is believed to have the force of an infallible and irrevocable bequest. What, in these circumstances, is the believing wife to do?

To remonstrate either with Esau or with his father would be, as she may well imagine, altogether in vain. They had gone too far, and committed themselves too deeply, to be now arrested by the warning of one whom they might suspect—perhaps with some justice—if not of malice, at least of partial counsel. The weakened mind of the old man, and the wilful mind of the young man, might seem alike to preclude any hope of success, if Rebekah had been inclined to try her influence with either. The case then seems desperate. It is true that she may safely leave it in the hands of him whose oracle is in danger, and rely upon his wisdom and power to baffle all attempts that may be made to turn his purpose aside. But it is difficult to remain inactive when a great evil is about to happen, and the means of preventing or averting it seem to be at hand. Shall I see the declared mind of God thwarted before my eyes, when a little ingenuity can suggest a way of turning the very endeavour to thwart it into the means of its accomplishment! Is not any device justifiable for such an end! May not fraud itself, in such a crisis, be regarded as almost pious?

Such is the probable and fair explanation of the mother's part in this miserably complex family sin.

II. The conduct of Jacob is little else than an aggravated repetition of his cold-blooded negotiation with his brother Esau about the sale of the birthright. He hesitates, indeed, when he is first asked by Rebekah to become a partner with her in her fraud; not, however, from any righteous abhorrence of the crime, but from doubt of its practicability (ver. 11, 12).

Accordingly, when he is reassured by the urgency of the tempter's solicitation—alas! that he should have had such a tempter!—he goes about the work of guile with a deliberation that shocks our sense of decency as well as of virtue (ver. 13). He suffers himself without remonstrance to be arrayed in the skin borrowed from a senseless animal, and the robes stolen from an unwitting brother. And led by the false fondness of

a mother into the chamber which the seeming approach of death, as well as the solemn transaction then on hand, should have hallowed with an awful reverence of truth and righteousness,—he heaps lie upon lie with unscrupulous effrontery ; abuses the simple confidence of the blind old man ; and almost, if we may so speak, betraying his father with a kiss,—steals from him the birthright-blessing,—and then hastens out of his sight, as if he were not only afraid to meet his brother, but impatient to exult in secret over the success with which his daring stratagem has been crowned (ver. 14-30).

Nor is it any palliation of his offence that he is leading his father in this matter to act according to the will and purpose of God. My father, he might say within himself, is infirm of purpose,—he is in his dotage. He has all along had a wrong bias with regard to the disposal of the birthright ; and now in the failure of his mental as well as bodily powers, he is scarcely to be held accountable for what he does. He must be managed for his own good as one manages a froward child in its days of unintelligent infancy. Miserable excuse ! as idle with respect to God, as it is cruel with respect to Isaac ! The oracle of God—the dotage of Isaac,—are these valid reasons for this crooked policy ? Nay, should not the very fact of God's purpose having been so unequivocally announced, supersede the necessity of all human plotting and contrivance ? Will the wit, any more than the wrath of man, work the righteousness of God ?—Let us stand still and see the salvation of God.

And then as to Isaac's imbecility, and the necessity of keeping him right by craft if not by reason,—does the interference of his wife and son really mend the matter ? Will Isaac's sin be the less, if by mere mistake he does one thing when he means to do another ? Is there no other method that may be tried ? Where is the use of prayer ?

The patriarch is about to convey the blessing by a deed implying a divine sanction and divine inspiration. May not God be asked to interpose, and the issue thereafter left to him ?

On whatever side we view it, the crime into which Rebekah hurries her favourite child Jacob is a very sad one ; and deeply have they both occasion, all their life long, to rue the day when they were tempted to take into their own hands the execution of the plans and purposes of the Most High.

III. Of Isaac himself, as his conduct on this memorable occasion illustrates his general character, there is but little to be said. An important inquiry, however, suggests itself on the subject of the faith which he is expressly said to have exercised. For it is with special reference to the transaction which we are now considering, that he is enrolled in the catalogue of the men "of whom the world was not worthy," the "great cloud of witnesses;" this emphatic testimony being borne of him ;—"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come" (Heb. xi. 20). What, one may ask, does the testimony mean ?

I. Let it be remembered in the first place, that in this whole transaction, Isaac understood himself to be the depository and transmitter of the great covenant-promise which his father Abraham had received. It was in that character that he blessed Jacob and Esau, and to realise that character implied an act and exercise of faith. In that faith, Isaac never wavered. Very early in his lifetime he was initiated into the most sublime and spiritual of the articles of its creed ; for the part he bore in the scene on Mount Moriah,—when he was young indeed, but not too young to apprehend the meaning of what he saw,—must have made him familiar with them all. The incidents of his life tend to confirm the impression which that scene is fitted to make, of Isaac's believing acquiescence in the terms of the covenant made with his father Abraham. The whole circumstances of his marriage—his contentment under the delay which his father's scruples occasioned—his unreserved surrender of himself into his father's hands—the ready consent he gave to what must have seemed to the eye of sense a perilous venture for a spouse—and the attitude of de-

votional meditation in which he is found waiting for the issue of the expedition,—all concur to give a strong conviction of the personal piety of Isaac, and his vivid apprehension of his high calling as the heir of the covenant and the ancestor of its great Mediator and Surety. Nor can there be room for doubt that, in his final testamentary arrangement, Isaac acted upon the faith which he had all along professed and cherished.

It may be a question indeed whether or not he chose the right time and adopted the right method. Misled by the failure of his sight, and other growing infirmities, he may have proceeded to the discharge of what should have been the last duty of his life, before he had any indication from God of his end being near, or any legitimate warrant to expect that divine inspiration which was wont to prompt the dying utterances of the prophetic patriarchs of old. In the manner also of pronouncing the decisive benediction, Isaac may have been, and probably was, in fault. That something like a feast should be associated with the solemn act of conveying the birthright-blessing; and that on such an occasion the pontifical robes belonging in hereditary succession to the first-born should be worn—we may be prepared to admit. But surely the feast should have been of a religious character, and the investiture of the first-born in his robes should have been a public and solemn religious act. A mere savoury mess of venison, the fruit of a day's hunting in the field, could have no appropriate relation to the prophetic act which the dying head of the household had to perform. And as to the investiture of the priestly and royal robes, for such the "goodly raiment" of the elder son is with great probability supposed to be, surely it should have been arranged beforehand with such open formality as would have rendered the assumption of them by stealth impossible. The entire ceremony, in short, in all its three parts,—in the eating of meat, the putting on of the garment of primogeniture, and the pronouncing of the solemn covenant-blessing,—should have been a devotional service in the presence

of all the household ; and not the pitiful stealing of a march on the part of one parent against the other.

It is on both sides a deplorable game of craft. If Rebekah is blamed, and justly blamed, for her cunning plot in favour of Jacob,—let Isaac's procedure also be duly scanned. Is the patriarch called to execute, as he believes, the last solemn deed of his earthly career ? And is he to do so, not merely in the character of an ordinary parent, but in the official capacity of a priest and prophet, entitled to look for special divine inspiration in this closing act of his life ? Then how does he set about it ? Not openly, in the face of all his family, and with the customary observance of all the appropriate sacrificial rites ; but clandestinely, without so much as communicating his purpose to the wife of his bosom. Certainly the conduct of Isaac, in seeking furtively, by an underhand manœuvre, to secure the envied and sorely-contested prerogative for Esau, does not indicate much more of truth and integrity than we are accustomed to ascribe to the plan of Jacob and Rebekah.

Nevertheless, it was by faith ~~that~~ Isaac was moved to dispose of the blessing.

For, in the second place, it is chiefly in the sequel of the scene that the faith of Isaac appears. When first he discovers the imposition that has been practised upon him, the patriarch is altogether overwhelmed. And no wonder ! His whole plan has miscarried. All the pains he has been taking to get the business done quietly, without the knowledge of the rival claimant and his partisan, have been thrown away. He has hurried it on in the hope that all would be over, and all securely settled on behalf of Esau, before Rebekah or Jacob could hear any surmise of what was on foot. No wonder, therefore, that when he finds himself so signally and shamefully foiled, he “trembles very exceedingly.” But through this trembling his faith manifests its power ; first in the broken accents of his passionate exclamation,—“ Who ? where is he that hath ” surreptitiously got the blessing ?—and next,

almost before the outburst is over, in the calm language of acquiescence, "yea, and he shall be blessed" (ver. 33).

It is the very agony of faith, sorely shaken, but yet recovering itself. The patriarch's eyes are opened ; it is as if a long dream were dispelled. All at once, and all around him, a new light flashes ; showing the past, the present, the future, in new colours. He has been trying to overreach ; but he is himself overreached. Above all, he has been "kicking against the pricks ;" and he finds that to be "hard." But now his faith signally triumphs. If he had given way to natural feeling, anger must have filled his bosom. If he had looked merely to second causes, he must have revoked his blessing on the instant, and turned it into a curse ; for he could not be held bound by anything he had uttered under a mistake or misapprehension, as to the party to whom he uttered it. What has passed, he might have said, between me and Jacob is essentially null and void. He got the birthright-blessing under a false pretence. I did not really mean to convey it to him.

Isaac maintains no such plea ; he owns the blessing as beyond recall.

And on what ground ? Simply on the ground of its being manifestly of God.

Here is the faith of Isaac ; the faith by which he "blessed Jacob and Esau." "Let God be true, and every man a liar," is the principle upon which now at last he acts.

There has been falsehood among all the parties concerned in the transaction ; they have all been trying to forestall and overreach one another. On all hands it is a miserable confusion and complexity of deceit ; and instead of the calm and holy beauty of a saint's departing hour,—a venerable patriarch in the presence of all belonging to him, and under the guidance and inspiration of his God, sealing with his latest voice the covenant and counsel of heaven,—the household is scandalised by a spectacle of domestic feud fitted to shake all confidence in human truthfulness, and make God's

chosen family a very by-word for disunion and dispeace, among all the dwellers upon the earth. But for his own name's sake, God overrules the evil for good, and on the ruins of man's manifold lies establishes his own truth. Signally does he visit upon the guilty parties, in their after-life, the plot in which they have been concerned. But in the first instance he disconcerts the plot itself. The well-devised scheme of the stealthy hunting, the hasty meal, and the secret blessing, is frustrated ; and Isaac, awaking as from a dream, owns that it is the doing of the Lord ! With fear and trembling he acknowledges at last the divine sovereignty, and acquiesces in the righteousness and salvation of God. He no longer resists God ; he believes, the Lord helping his unbelief ; and by faith he confirms the birthright-blessing anew to Jacob. He consoles, indeed, as best he can, the passionate grief of Esau ; but he does not now question the divine purpose in favour of his younger son. He recognises in him the heir of the promise made to his father Abraham, and the ancestor of the expected Messiah. He sets to his seal that God is true. It was thus that "by faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come (Heb. xi. 20).

IV. The saddest of all the pictures in this dismal domestic tragedy is that of Esau. There is nothing extant in the whole range of literature, sacred or profane, more heart-rending than the wild and passionate outburst of his sorrow ; his cry, his "exceeding bitter cry,"—"Bless me, even me also, O my father !" (ver. 34). His keen complaint against his brother ;—"Is not he rightly named Jacob ? for he hath supplanted me these two times : he took away my birth-right ; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing" (ver. 36) ; his pathetic pleading with his father "Hast thou not reserved a blessing for me ?" (ver. 36) ; and finally the uncontrollable vehemence of his despair, when replying to the feeble question of the agitated old man ;—"What shall I do now unto thee, my son ?" (ver. 37)—he

abandons himself to the utmost agony of woe, crying, "Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, even me also, O my father!"—and then "lifting up his voice, and weeping" (ver. 38);—the whole constitutes a more melting scene by far than poet ever fancied or painter ever drew. And if we isolate it from all consideration of the spiritual relations in which the parties stood to one another, our sympathy is carried along in full flood with the whole swelling torrent of the injured man's wrath and grief. But it will not be wise to suffer our sympathy with him, or our resentment of the pitiful trick that baffled him, to blind our minds to the real character of Esau, and of the course of conduct in which he was defeated.

Tried even by the standard of worldly honour, Esau is on this occasion found grievously wanting. If Jacob succeeded in circumventing him, did not he, in the first instance, seek to steal a march upon Jacob? Setting the oracle of God aside,—was there not enough in his own compact and covenant with Jacob to preclude the idea of this underhand procedure in the mind of an upright and conscientious man? Even if he thought that he had been hardly used in that negotiation,—and that he ought to recall the foolish bargain by which he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage,—he might have remonstrated with his brother instead of seeking to outwit him by a secret stratagem. Surely that is not exactly the behaviour that might be expected from a frank and manly spirit; it is not quite the conduct of one who "sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not" (Ps. xv. 4).

But it is chiefly in a spiritual view that his conduct is here again to be regarded,—in the light of the inspired commentary of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which the writer speaks of Esau as "a profane person, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright;" and who "afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, was rejected; for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (Heb. xii. 14-17). So the apostle testifies with reference

evidently to the passionate pleading of Esau with his father Isaac. Esau really did seek a place of repentance. Not merely did he seek to change his father's mind, as some understand the expression ; he sought to recall and reverse his own rash act in consenting to the sale of what now at last he had learned in some measure adequately to value. The apostle manifestly alludes to Esau's own change of mind, to which the wretched man sought to give effect ; not to any change he needed or tried to work in the mind of Isaac. For he had indeed changed his mind upon the subject, and he would have made good that change of mind now, if he had been able. How far he was in earnest desirous of the spiritual blessings of grace and salvation involved in the birthright,—is another question ; at all events he was so far awakened as to be alive to the preciousness and importance of that which he had once despised,—the birthright-legacy which he had consented to sell, and which now at last he sought in vain to recover. Yes ! it was, alas ! in vain. He had taken a decided step. The issue was beyond recall. Neither toil, nor craft, nor importunity, nor tears could revoke the deed.

Nor could he take refuge in the oracular decree. That decree made the sale unmeaning as regards the purpose and will of God ; but it did not make it unmeaning as regards the intention of Esau. His consent to sell the birthright, and his desperate attempt to recover its blessing, were alike irrespective of the oracle. If he had owned at first that revelation in the exercise of a true faith, he never would have negotiated the sale at all ; he would have made common cause with Jacob, upon a different footing altogether ; upon the footing of a common interest in the Messiah, of whom Jacob was to be the father. Or, if he had really come now to recognise and believe the revelation in its real significancy, he would have sought to recall and review the past transaction, with all its sin and shame, in a very different spirit, and to a very different effect. He would have sought for a place of repent-

ance with even deeper and bitterer sorrow than he did ; but it would have been with sorrow “ after a godly sort ;” and he would have sought for it in the way of fulfilling the very terms of the oracle. He would have looked to Jacob, or rather to the Messiah of whom Jacob was to be the ancestor, for any interest in the birthright or its blessing to which he might yet hope to aspire. If he had thus sought for a place of repentance, or an opportunity of effectually changing his mind, he would not have sought for it in vain.

It was not, however, this, but something far short of this, that Esau after all desired. He was awakened, indeed, so far as to see and bitterly lament the folly he had committed in consenting to barter all that was precious in his hope for the future in exchange for a present morsel of meat. Fain would he have repented now of that folly. And if a very agony of carefulness and floods of tears could have availed, he would have recalled the past. But that was all. To the last, there was no real acquiescence in the divine method of salvation,—no real seeking of the blessing in the only direction in which it could be found, and through the only name in which it was treasured up.

And is not this the very awakening that often haunts the dying hour, or the dreary solitude, of the unhappy child of earth, when he is startled to find that he has made a miserable bargain in consenting to gain the whole world and lose his own soul ? Remorse,—rage,—revenge,—madden his breast and fire his brain ! He has committed a fearful mistake in living for the world, and bartering for the world’s mess of pottage all that might have brightened his immortal hope ! What energy, even of despair, agitates his frame ! If cries and tears could suffice, he would yet recall, and cancel, and undo the past. But in all this, there is no real bringing of his soul into subjection to the sovereign will of God, or the saving righteousness of Christ, or the sanctifying work of the Spirit. He is stung to the quick as a disappointed, befooled,

and outwitted man ;—not converted to the meekness of a little child. There is no acquiescence in the appointed way of mercy ; no seeking of a Saviour for his lost and guilty soul. But poignant regret of the past, and blank terror of the future, extort the cry of expiring agony ; and extort that cry in vain.

It is the appointed nemesis of the despised voice of wisdom—the slighted gospel call ;—“ Because I have called, and ye refused ; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded ; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof : I also will laugh at your calamity ; I will mock when your fear cometh ; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind ; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer ; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me : for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord : they would none of my counsel ; they despised all my reproof : therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices.”

